



RICHARD BOWES

PAT CADIGAN

THEODORA GOSS

ELIZABETH HAND

TANITH LEE

NICK MAMATAS

AND MORE . . .

EDITED BY

**STEVE
BERMAN**

HANDSOME DEVIL

HANDSOME DEVIL STORIES OF SIN AND SEDUCTION

STEVE BERMAN



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“Love is a devil. There is no evil but Love.”
—**William Shakespeare**

“Handsome is as handsome does”
—**J.R.R. Tolkien**

Introduction

As you turn the pages of this volume past the table of contents, you invite into your imagination a grand collection of Lotharios who seek to seduce you. *Seduction*. From the Latin *seducere*, “to lead away or lead astray.” In English, the term was first used to describe the enticing of an individual away from the true faith (Roman Catholic or Anglican, depending on the era), but around the latter half of the eighteenth century “seduction” acquired the meaning we currently recognize: leading astray into *sexual* error.

Only women could be “seduced,” of course—we’re more equal opportunity today, perhaps—beguiled off the path of virtue to wantonness. Ah, but did not Moll Flanders enjoy a more entertaining life before she renounced her “Fortunes and Misfortunes”? I promise she did, and so will you by the time you finish the last page of this book. The philanderers in these stories are the best at seduction because they are no normal men but rather supernatural entities best classified as incubi.

Incubus. Also Latin, from a verb meaning “to lie upon.” Eventually the noun came to mean “nightmare”—when adopted into English, a very solid, if supernatural, bad dream.

In Sands’s *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England*, the author reports a sixteenth-century belief that any cinema attendee of the twentieth and early twenty-first century has come to know as fact, at least within the genre of the horror film (and arguably fiction):

Young women were thought to be more attractive to demons than old women, men, or children, implicating

female sexuality as a condition for possession. The behavior of women possessed was frequently interpreted by onlookers as similar to the behavior of sexually aroused women . . . Phantom pregnancies were considered a symptom of possession or sexual activity with an incubus, a male demon who copulated with human females and pretended to impregnate them but who possessed no seed.[1](#)

But long before Queen Elizabeth's time medieval minds had devised elegant explanations for the problems of male nocturnal emission and pregnancy in virgins (the Church preferred not to permit later maidens to share Mary's divine lover). For the first, the wily, wanton succubus (Latin, from a verb meaning "to lie under"—even in infernal dalliances patriarchy demands the missionary position); for the more serious second, the incubus.

It should be pointed out that orthodoxy insisted demons were infertile. The lucky man visited by a succubus could not sire a half-infernal child on his demon lover because male bad behavior has few consequences. The sins of women must, however. To get around that conundrum, one line of thought suggests succubus and incubus were the same demon, a gender-bending fiend. In female guise she would visit blameless men, especially priests. Having succeeded in her goal of harvesting their seed, the cunning fiend underwent a foul inversion to masculine form and sowed that ill-gotten seed in the wombs of his unlucky victims. (Cloistered nuns especially preferred.) Apparently the interval within unholy flesh had a corrosive effect on human sperm, as the offspring of such complicated congress (sometimes referred to as cambions) possessed a wicked nature if not demonic powers.

With the advent of the so-called Age of Reason in the eighteenth century and the twin marches of science and technology into the nineteenth, the traditional villains of

Christian demonology were largely discredited. The incubus was relegated to the old-fashioned realm of folk tale. There remained a persistent demand for supernatural rakes, however (women being still prone to bad behavior), so from the fringes of literature arose a fearsome upstart: the vampire. The whole messy, unmentionable business of sexuality could be ignored—spilt blood might be spoken of in polite society, unlike spilt semen. Seduction by the vampire led not to pregnancy (a risky condition before modern medicine, to be sure) and wicked bastards but to a preternatural disease (which need not be explicitly labeled “venereal”) that spread from victim to victim.

Yet, although the vampire’s popularity has only increased (and, lucky fiend, modern writers have been pleased to reveal the sensuality underlying his seductiveness), like all slumbering beasts the incubus was merely biding his time. The 1970s saw the release of *Rosemary’s Baby* by Ira Levin and the film *The Omen*, and the notion that the greatest of evils springs from the womb gained new currency. Copulation with demons or the Devil himself, willing and otherwise, returned to the zeitgeist. Scholars of pop literature and film have doubtless found ingenious methods of tying this trope to the invention of the Pill and the legalization of abortion. I am sure a solid case can be made for the rise of demonic rape in contemporary storytelling being among the patriarchy’s responses to contemporary women’s hard-won control of their own fertility.

There are folk who assume all stories of incubi enchanting women (and men—yes, as a gay man, I can’t responsibly deny my fellows’ propensity to fall into the arms of scoundrels) are tales of rape and thus should neither be written nor read. All discussion of political correctness or “censorship” aside, and without denying the darkness in some of the fantastical tales that follow, I can assure you, gentle reader, that the seductions, the indulgences, are more often consensual and mutually enjoyed than the

medieval mind could ever credit. The “sin” in this book’s subtitle is a word to attract the casual eye rather than any judgment on sensuality or sexuality. “Handsome Devil” need not be a term of opprobrium.

So settle someplace warm and comfortable. Perhaps have a glass of wine close at hand. Inhibitions should be suspended as much as disbelief, you see. Welcome these incubi into your imagination. Just be wary if they linger too long . . . handsome devils have been known to do so throughout the ages.

Steve Berman
Summer 2013

1 Sands, Kathleen R., *Demon Possession In Elizabethan England* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004) 19

Lilac Season

Claire Humphrey

I wore my funeral dress to Crystal's wedding. It was the only dress that felt right any more, even though the black cotton strained at the buttons across my chest and around my hips. Mom had draped her cream-and-blue scarf around my neck, but it was still the same dress everyone in Van Eyck had seen me wear at six visitations, six services, six interments.

The church in Davisville was much bigger than ours, with a view right across the lake to the distant towers of Toronto. Mom parked in the middle of the lot and we walked past a whole fleet of the wedding party's vehicles, all studded with pink tissue carnations.

On the church steps, a half dozen groomsmen stood in a ragged line. One of them had already lost his corsage, his lapel adorned only with a scrap of greenery and a pearl-headed pin. "More for the bride's side?" he said, extending an arm to me. "Beautiful day for a wedding, isn't it?"

Over his shoulder I saw Mom, winking madly and shooing her hands at me.

"I guess," I said to the groomsman, smiling as much as I ever did these days, but I watched his face go cool with disappointment.

The groomsman led me up and handed me into a pew decked with white ribbon. Mom slid in beside me. I shut my eyes and listened. In the high-ceilinged sanctuary, I could hear the square heels of children's shoes and the sharper heels of ladies', and a buzz of excited whispering quite different from the hush preceding a funeral service.

“Crystal lost people that day, too,” Mom whispered to me, “and look at her now.”

I opened my eyes to look, and there she was: Crystal Romijn, soon to be Crystal Smits, glowing and poised at the bottom of the aisle, as the organist began the wedding march.

Her father held her arm. Led her forward. Step and pause, step and pause, looking around the church like royalty.

Crystal might have lost people that day, the day of the accident, but she hadn't lost her father. She hadn't lost her fiancé, who waited for her at the head of the aisle, with his open hands reaching out.

I was happy for her. As happy as I could be, with my own father in the ground, and so many others.

Dinner was served in the church hall. I sat with Mom at a ladies' table, along with some other unmarried daughters. Every ten minutes someone began the relentless din of forks against glasses again, and Crystal had to get up and haul her train out from under her new husband's feet and present her lips to him. She didn't look as if she minded. By the time the main course was served—pork chops with almond green beans and roasted potatoes—the newlyweds were pink with wine and laughter, and the kisses began to lengthen.

I was old enough for wine now, just, but the smell of it reminded me of the compost heap in Mom's garden, or the grapes left crushed and rotting on the roads behind the harvest trucks in autumn. I drank water, and left a portion of my pork chop on my plate.

Mom nodded her approval: she used to scold me for overeating, but these days she did not have to mention it. I could tell it tasted good, the sweet-savoury stickiness of the maple glaze, but it was as if the goodness was happening to someone else, someone in the next chair over. Mom and I placed our cutlery at the same neat angle on our plates, sat

back, and pretended to turn our attention to the maid of honour's toast.

And finally the toasts ended, and everyone rose in a clatter of chairs and shoes, and the MC announced, "Ladies and gents, the bar is open!"

I rose in as much of a hurry as everyone else, but I went the opposite way from the crowd, back into the church.

The sanctuary smelled of lemon oil and old wood. I rounded the foremost pews where the two families had been seated; they were still decorated with bunches of white peonies. The white carpet rolled out in the aisle for Crystal's promenade felt spongy under the heels of my shoes.

I pushed through the double doors at the bottom of the aisle, to the vestibule. I sat on the small table where the programs were stacked on Sunday mornings, and I leaned down to unbuckle my ankle-straps and let my shoes slip off my feet. Then I unwound Mom's scarf and dropped it, too, and unbuttoned the collar of my funeral dress.

In the dim hush, between two sets of doors, I tilted my head back to keep the tears from welling.

I did not want to weep again. I felt as if I'd done nothing else since the accident. But my father should have been there. We should have been seated at a table with another family, not at the widows' table. My friends should have been there: Katie and Marieke and even Angela, who I'd bickered with all the time but now missed every bit as much as the others.

Jason and Piet should have been there, too, swapping jokes and hockey stories. Maybe Piet would have asked Angela to marry him by now. Maybe Jason would have made up his mind to move to Toronto. Maybe Marieke would have been in Crystal's wedding party, instead of one of the Davisville girls.

One accident, two cars, six funerals. A hundred and fifty days of mourning, so far. And I could not begin to count all

the ways things had changed.

Just as I was about to put my shoes back on and go hunt down a Kleenex to blow my nose, the outer door swung open and one of the groomsmen slipped in.

He held one of the paper candle-lanterns that had been hung in the lilac trees around the church grounds. It swung from a negligent hand as he turned and pulled the door shut behind him, almost soundless.

My nose was going to run if I didn't do something. I sniffled.

He spun, brows high. He wasn't one of the groom's family, not with those dark eyes and hair. His coat was different from the others', too, longer, and it fit him like it was his and not a rental. His corsage—tattered, petal-bruised—drooped from a collar of black silk.

"You must be on the Davisville team," I said.
"Congratulations on the cup."

He chuckled. "Thank you. Though I can't claim much of the glory. I'm new here."

"Still, you must be pretty good, or you guys wouldn't have unseated the three-year reigning champs."

That was a bad thing for me to say, because it reminded me why we weren't winning any more: Jason had been top scorer last year and Piet had been goalie, until they were taken from us.

I looked up at the ceiling again. The groomsman's shadow stretched crazily across it as he swung the lantern in his hand.

I heard rustling, and felt something soft pressed into my hand. A handkerchief.

I dried my cheeks with it. "I didn't think people had these any more," I said thickly.

"I'm old-fashioned," said the groomsman serenely, settling his weight against the table beside me. He twisted

to set the lantern behind us, and faced forward again, his features in shadow.

He did not ask me why I was weeping at a wedding. He said instead, "I knew the Riesling in these parts had an excellent reputation, but I had never tasted it until today."

I shrugged. "I don't drink."

He half-turned toward me, that brow going up again. "No?"

I shook my head. "I don't like the taste."

"You will," he said. "Find me later. When you're ready."

He settled a warm palm on my shoulder.

I flinched away, annoyed. "No, thanks."

He only looked amused, withdrew his hand slowly, and shifted to his feet. Took up the lantern and let himself into the sanctuary, leaving me alone in the dark.

I gave myself a few minutes to regain my composure. When I thought I was ready to return, I strapped my shoes on again, and picked up the scarf, and only then realized the groomsman must have seen me barefoot, with my dress opened to show my collarbone and the lacy top edge of my camisole and the full upper curves of my breasts.

Blushing, I gave myself another few minutes.

The first dance was past already; I saw Crystal seated and fanning herself, with her cousin offering her a glass of sparkling wine. I saw a cluster of black suits at the bar, and tried not to look that way.

I nearly fled back to the vestibule, but Mom was at the coffee station, beckoning me over.

"Mrs Van Houten, this is my daughter, Sofie," she said. "Sofie, I'd like you to meet Mrs Van Houten. She's one of Crystal's new aunts."

I shook hands, and said enough of the right things to make Mom happy.

"I have a young man who'd love to make your acquaintance," Mrs Van Houten said. "He's visiting. Friend of

my nephew Wilfred's."

With Mom right there, I couldn't say anything other than yes.

Mrs Van Houten looked over at the bar, and beckoned.

The man who approached wasn't one of the blue-eyed Smits boys, though. He was the groomsman who had given me his handkerchief.

He smiled enchantingly at Mrs Van Houten, and then at me, raising his brow just slightly when I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Željko, this is Sofie Lowsley," Mrs Van Houten said, "from over in Van Eyck. Sofie, Željko Ilić." She sounded out his name carefully, as if she'd just had a lesson.

Željko shook my hand. He said, "You look ready for something to drink. Can I get you a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks," I said.

Mom said, "Now, Sofie, be polite."

If she didn't care, I guessed I didn't have grounds to object. I didn't resist when Željko led me away.

We did not go to the bar, as I'd expected. Željko led me straight past it and out the side door of the church, into fresh evening, lilac-scented. A few fireflies floated along the hedge that separated the church from the manse garden. Mourning doves called in the dusk.

We did not stay outside, though; we went back in through the front doors, and up the steps toward the choir-loft.

On the landing where the steps turned, Željko had set two folding chairs, the paper lantern, a bottle of wine, and two glasses.

I stopped when I saw it, tugging my hand from his—when had I begun holding it in the first place?

"Ah, ah," he said. "Taste it before you run away. This is not the wine served downstairs by our hosts. This is just for you."

“It’d be wasted on me. Seriously, just pour me the cheap stuff.”

He caught my hand in both of his. “It is mine to give, and I choose to share it with you. I do not care if you know about wine. I only want to watch you enjoy it.”

It struck, then, like sparks from flint: a feeling I could not even name. It was in my body, deep in the core of me, and also in my heart. I had felt it before, but not since the accident, and I had almost forgotten it existed.

I could not name it, but I knew one thing: I wanted more of it.

I sat down on one of the chairs. Željko leaned past me to open the window; old paint and caulk crackled and broke as he raised it up. I smelled lilac from outside, and the warm wool of his jacket.

He settled himself, and applied a corkscrew to the wine-bottle. I watched his hands, because I was too shy to look at his face. His hands didn’t look like a hockey player’s hands: all the fingers were slim and straight, unbroken, the knuckles unscarred. He wasn’t particularly tall or broad, either, though his shoulders looked wonderful in his trim coat.

I watched the pale wine as he poured it into each of the glasses. It looked almost like water in the candlelight.

“Close your eyes,” said Željko.

“No way.”

“Then do not. But focus on your other senses.”

I heard his chair scrape. Felt a very faint warming of the air around me as his arm extended, holding out the glass to me.

Smelled something wonderful, like sun on a peach orchard, like moss on limestone, like dew on apple-blossoms just about to fall.

Felt the cool touch of glass on my lips, and tasted my first sip, which was everything the scent had promised, and more.

I swallowed, and sputtered. Željko lowered the glass. In the twilight his eyes looked black. He smiled suddenly, turned the glass, placed his lips where mine had just been, and sipped. "Delicious," he said, and there was that feeling again.

I might have expected wine to become cloying, like juice, if I had thought about it. But it was not. Every sip was wonderful. I said so to Željko, and he laughed, a low private laugh. He leaned in close to pour for me again, and when my glass was full, he caught a stray drop from the bottle's mouth on his fingertip, and licked it away.

I held very still. I knew what the feeling was.

"I think I'd like to sleep with you," I said.

"You think so?" he said, still laughing a little. "I would like that very much, only I do not want you to be uncertain."

I thought about it for a moment. "I'm not uncertain," I said. "Not about sleeping with you. Only I don't know what I want to do with you after."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Nothing you don't wish. But you must understand, I am not for this." His gesture seemed to take in and dismiss the wedding ongoing in the other part of the church.

I lifted my glass and touched it to his, and we both drank.

And I took off my scarf again, and opened the collar of my dress, deliberately before his eyes.

The thing about grieving is that it leaches away so much else from the world: not only the lost loved ones, but things the loved ones did not even touch. Grapefruit lost its tartness. The smell of stew cooking in the Crock-Pot lost its homeliness. The music on the radio sounded tinny and rhythmless. The snow even lost its chill.

My town was studded with places I could not visit. The waterfall where I'd last gone hiking with Piet and Angela. The restaurant where Daddy had taken me for my

graduation dinner. The bakery where Marieke and I had met for coffee and muffins most mornings before school. The bleachers behind the school, where Jason and I had kissed in ninth grade, and where, in tenth, he'd confessed to me that he was falling in love with another boy. The road between Van Eyck and Comberton, where, just off the shoulder, there still stood six white wooden crosses and a wreath of yellow artificial roses.

In the face of grieving like that, I would have sold my soul for a slice of toast with real crispness and melted butter, or a cup of coffee with real richness, or a sun that rose with real light, or a bird singing a real song. But for as long as it lasted, all things were meaningless, cardboard mockeries of themselves. And no one wanted my soul.

Željko slipped out of his jacket, and tossed it over the windowsill, heedless of the bruised corsage. He loosened his tie, a black one, different somehow from the ones the other groomsmen wore.

He pointed to my foot, and gestured for me to lift it. He unbuckled the strap at my ankle and eased the shoe off, stroking gentle fingers over the skin where it had chafed.

"You don't actually need to seduce me," I said. "I already said yes."

"Seduction is pleasant," he said, unperturbed. I thought he had a faint accent, one I couldn't place; I hadn't noticed it before, but now I thought of it, the way he spoke was more deliberate than the other guys around here.

"Teach me how to say your name," I said.

"Željko," he said, enunciating, eyes on mine. He reached out for my other foot.

"Željko," I said, a bit breathlessly.

"Very good. Drink your wine."

I did, and felt the delicious burst of flavour in my mouth, the freshness of the air against my bared throat, the heat of Željko's palm covering the arch of my foot.

Heard, below, my mother's voice in the vestibule.

I scrambled to pull my foot away and grab for my shoe.

Željko's mouth pouted. "We have just begun."

"My mom might be strangely okay with me having a glass of wine with you, but she'll definitely flip out if she sees anything else," I hissed. "Come on, help me out!"

He didn't. He crossed his arms and sat there silently laughing while I fumbled with my shoe-buckles and my dress-buttons and my scarf. I tossed his jacket at him and glared until he put it on. By the time my mother mounted the stairs, we were sitting properly, across the table from each other, and I was trying not to laugh at the dusting of paint flakes across Željko's shoulder and chest.

"There you are," Mom said. "It's nearly midnight. We've got church in the morning."

"Of course, Mom," I said. Church was her solace since the accident: every week she wept through the hymns while I held her hand, but she said it brought her peace.

Željko gave her the same charming smile he'd given downstairs. This time Mom looked as if she could see through it, and I was the one who could not help but find it beautiful.

"Good night, Sofie," he said to me. "It's been lovely chatting with you."

"Yes, indeed. I hope to see you again. Željko."

"You will," he said, without the smile this time.

As I turned away to follow Mom down the stairs, I saw him raise my glass, and tilt what was left of my wine into his mouth, as if he was very thirsty.

Mom drove home. I was sleepy, all of a sudden, as if I was a kid again, head against the window. I wrapped the scarf around my neck against the cool of the night, and blinked slowly at the dark outside, trees and silos and fields and occasionally a house with a single light.

And fireflies, now and then, flicking in and out along the wind-rows. It seemed like a cloud of them, following us. But maybe that was a dream I was having, as I flicked in and out of sleep.

I set my shoes side by side on the closet floor. I folded Mom's scarf and hung it; took off my dress and tossed it in the hamper. I unhooked my bra, and ran my palms over my breasts, which ached, and over the reddened ridges on my shoulders where the bra-straps had cut in. I had come late to my full size, and now I did not know what to do with myself.

I lay naked on my back, sheets pushed aside, my nightshirt left on the hook inside the closet door, for once. Spring hadn't quite turned to summer, so maybe it was the wine, but my skin felt warm and welcomed the breeze from the barely-open window by the bed.

As I slid into sleep, dreaming open-eyed, I saw fireflies outside again, or maybe stars, swirling slowly. They streamed down, flattened, swarmed through the screenless open inch of my window, fanned out again into a cloud. A cloud man-height, shaped out of bright sparks and the darkness between them.

I woke fully then, on a gasp.

"You asked me to come," he whispered, the sparks dimming until he was only pale skin and dark eyes flashing back starlight. "You wanted this."

"I thought you were one of the groomsmen," I said. "Not some kind of . . . whatever you are."

"Shall I leave? I will, if you ask. What I want from you must come with your full consent."

He was very still while I thought about it. Finally I shook my head. "Stay. Just for tonight."

"There is a cost," he said.

"There's a cost to everything." I slid my hands into his hair and tugged his mouth to mine.

The kiss was like a sudden change in the weather, like a drenching summer storm, making all the hairs along my spine stand up and my eyes water. Željko murmured something against my lips, and I hummed back.

Part of me—a small part, receding rapidly—was crying out that I should just say no, that this was probably one of the stages of grief, that I had no business sleeping with a guy I'd just met, even if he'd been a regular guy and not something made up of fireflies . . . and that was all absolutely true and I was still absolutely doing this.

Then Željko ran his hand from the flat of my shoulder around my arm, over my collarbone, down the weight of my breast. I held my breath at the wonder of it.

"You are not afraid?" he said.

I shook my head. "This isn't my first time. Just my first in a while."

I felt his mouth smile against my throat, and then he moved lower.

It wasn't my first time, but it made the other times fade like the moon at sunrise. Željko's fingers parted the curls of hair at my entrance and two of them slipped inside, and at the same time, his teeth pressed very gently at the mound of my breast, so that I tipped my head back and gasped.

His free hand pressed over my mouth to remind me where we were. I smiled against his fingers, and let my tongue curl around them, and I felt the silent intake of his breath against my flesh.

He did not rush me. He took me from ready to readier to—oh, I was going to cry if I didn't—and then he added his mouth, suckling at the most delicious spot, working his fingers within, and I flared up like phosphorus, sudden and bright.

Even before I put myself back together, Željko was looming over me, skin pale against the darkness, a faint black trail of hair leading down from his chest to his belly to

the root of him, and he was going to enter me, and I wanted him so much I had to bite my tongue on a plea.

I came again around him, with his fingers spearing through my hair, with his mouth on mine.

He followed me a moment later, and I thought I saw a brightness pass between us, like lightning within clouds.

I would have asked him about it, but sleep washed up over me while I was still kissing the taste of myself from his lips.

The morning light looked very golden, and Mom was tapping on my door.

"Aren't you up yet?" she said. "Sofie? We don't want to be late for church."

I yawned mightily and sat up on my elbows and realized I really, really needed a shower.

"Just a few minutes, Mom," I called back. "Sorry! I guess I slept in."

I tossed back the rumpled sheets and heard a tiny patter on the floor. A single firefly. It flicked its wings and righted itself; it looked day-drunk and weak. I laid my hand flat on the floorboards and the firefly crawled up onto my skin. Its light flickered on, tiny against the rising day.

I held it up close to my face. "Thanks," I breathed, and the light brightened a little, and the firefly took wing and zipped out through the window into the clear air.

When I came downstairs, as clean as a sponge-bath in the sink could make me, hair pinned up, dressed in a sober skirt and blouse, I found a slice of buttered toast and a cup of coffee waiting for me. The toast was crisp and hot and dripping with butter. The coffee was cream-rich and honey-sweet. Outside the window, the birds in the lilac trees sang gorgeous songs.

So this was the world, mine again.

“You look cheery,” Mom said, a bit sourly, as she came in from watering the garden. She washed and lotioned her hands, and settled her church hat on her head.

I turned away to hide the private smile on my face, and followed her out to the car.

I lost the smile a few minutes later. Mom turned onto the main road and the sun came through the window in the weirdly bright way that meant I was on the edge of a migraine.

I shut my eyes against it. Felt around for the bottle of ibuprofen in my purse and swallowed one. It was coming on fast, though. The faint smell of exhaust nauseated me.

“Can you please . . . pull over?”

“Here?” Mom said, sounding dubious.

“Yes. Please!”

I felt the tires crunch on the gravel shoulder. I shouldered my door open and leaned out, retching.

When I lifted my head and blinked open my streaming eyes, I saw why Mom had not wanted to stop: we were on the Comberton road, right where the accident had happened.

Twenty feet ahead, I saw the cluster of crosses wreathed in yellow roses. And then I understood what Željko had meant about the cost.

I tried anyway. Not that day; Mom drove me home and I slept off the headache for a few hours. But the next day, and the next, I drove out on the Comberton road, and had to turn back. I took a roundabout route to the church, and discovered the churchyard was forbidden to me, too. I could not even get close enough to see between the young birches to the six newest gravestones. Katie, Marieke, Angela, Piet, Jason. My father. Lost to me all over again.

I slumped down behind the wheel of Mom’s car and cried harder than I had since the accident.

On my return, I saw Mom out back, hanging laundry. I filled a basket with wet things from the machine and went to join her.

“Mom.” I set down the basket and scooping a handful of clothes-pins, “I don’t think I can stay here.”

She looked at my face, sighed, and took one of the damp sheets from the basket, shaking it out briskly and flipping it over the line. “If you go, I’ll be all alone.”

“You’ll have your friends, and euchre, and church.”

“I was hoping you’d meet someone, and settle near me.”

I shook my head. I did not tell her that would never happen. She could learn it later, by degrees, and maybe it would not cut her so deep.

The thought made my eyes well again. But at the same time I could feel the breeze lifting, carrying bewitching pollens over the fields and drying the tears before they fell.

From our house, the land sloped down toward the lake: fresh spring leaves brightened the treetops, and the fields were greening over, and beyond them, the water was delft blue, all the ice long since melted.

Across the lake, I could just see the towers of Toronto. I knew there were foods there I had never tasted, musics I had never heard, vivid paintings on the walls of alleys. I might not know happiness yet, I might be grieving my losses for a few years to come, but now I knew pleasure again, and pleasure would carry me through until the return of joy.

A Spoonful of Salt

Nicole M. Taylor

This is not the story that Naomi told when the story men came to collect all of our memories. Instead, she told about her granny and the blue cookie jar. Marco was a dead man and a sore point by then.

Marco was Naomi's first and only love from the time she was fourteen, which might seem young to you. It might have been kinder, though, had she started going with him a bit sooner. They only got three years of hand-holding and walk-taking and four months as man and wife before he passed. Even here, where lives are often mean little things, it didn't seem fair.

Marco was a sailor, which is the usual occupation for our men. He crewed on his uncle's rig and he died there with the rest of them when it went down during a late November squall. Of course, Naomi was hundreds of miles away and had no way of knowing about that when she walked into the kitchen one morning and found her husband sitting at the table.

Now, Naomi had been without Marco for going on a month and a half and her own daddy was a sailor as well. She was well used to being alone, as all us women are. It can be frightening. The island is small and we know the men, their names and the names of their mommas and sisters. But that didn't stop the fearing, not altogether. It was a kind of ticking, a working like a machine in the back of your head. Each woman on the island kept a running tally of each sharpened-edged, deadly thing in her home. For Naomi, it was

the long rifle in the back of the closet, the six wooden-handled knives in the kitchen drawer, even the heavy carriage clock that her daddy'd made her for a wedding present.

And so when she saw Marco sitting there, she was just standing still, but her mind was zipping away all "how am I going to get to the closet?" or "how am I to open the knife drawer without his hearing?" Because, by all rights, Marco should have been weeks away across the water right at that very moment (right at that very moment, Marco was floating in the cold ocean making dinner for the fish, but of course Naomi didn't know that).

But he was just *there*, Marco. He was just sitting and staring down at his hands like he was noticing them for the first time. He didn't look particularly dangerous. He looked like her husband, the good boy she'd known her whole life.

"Marco?" she said, with her hand resting but not moving on the knife drawer. He turned to look at her, but he did it real slow and when he saw her, he didn't seem to know her at all.

Naomi pulled out the drawer and it make a little wheely creak. Marco's face didn't move at all.

"Naomi," is what he said finally, and said it like she was some old friend he hadn't seen in years. Like he was proud of himself for remembering her name.

Naomi was a practical sort. You see a lot of antsy girls get married before they're ready; still too young and feckless to keep a house, let alone a husband. Naomi wasn't like that; you could eat off her floors and, though he wasn't around long, you never caught Marco complaining. Being like she was, Naomi couldn't help wondering if maybe it wasn't more likely that she was having a sort of wild daydream than that her husband had up and appeared like magic at her kitchen table, right next to a piece of blueberry pie wrapped in waxy paper.

She backed out of the kitchen without saying a word and went across the way to Elia DuPree's place. Elia was about five years older than Naomi and she was in the habit of giving advice to the girl, as is often the case in the friendships of women.

This was a Saturday, so Elia was doing her baking and she was flour-white up to her elbows. "Well, I dunno," she told Naomi, who was pacing around the kitchen like a needy cat. "My daddy died when I was young and my mama was always telling about how she saw him the night his ship went down upstairs in our house, going from room to room and checking on us kids."

"You think Marco's dead?"

Elia didn't answer for a real long time. "That's not what I said," she told Naomi. But it sure sounded like that was what she had meant. You might think Elia was scaring Naomi for no reason, just being superstitious. And maybe she was, but she'd thought about it and between Naomi Smalls going off her head and a sailor dying at sea with a bit of funny business, she knew which was more likely.

Naomi had prepared herself for the idea that Marco might not come back to her; or she thought she had. Listening to Elia, she couldn't help but wonder if she had known, somewhere in the hidden parts of her heart, that something terrible had happened.

She started crying, right there in Elia's kitchen and Elia came right over and held on to her, though she left white dust on her shoulders and her back.

Naomi didn't go home for another forty minutes and she didn't expect to find anything when she did. It was a blessing, she supposed. This way she'd have time to prepare for the funeral and for the pitiful looks she'd get around town. She'd looked that way herself at those sad little widows with their teenage faces.

But when she got back, Marco was still there. He'd moved into the sitting room and he was just standing in the corner,

looking down at the unfinished cradle that sat there.

Naomi had been hoping hard for a baby, but her monthlies had stubbornly come just as regular as rain in the spring. Hating to see her so down in the mouth, Marco started work on the cradle. He told her he had to get a move on, because when he got back, he was going to give her a little baby boy to take care of. Feeling silly, Naomi started crying again.

"I made that," Marco declared, pointed at the cradle. He didn't seem troubled by her tears.

"Mmm-hmn," was all Naomi could manage.

"But I didn't finish it."

Naomi crossed the room slowly until she was right up close to him. She could see his chest rise and fall. He smelled like he always did, dirt and briny water and the dusky dried leaves of his hair.

"You said you would when you came back."

Marco turned to look at her. He smelled just the same, but his eyes were all wrong. "I'm sorry," is what he said. Naomi looked at the cradle, touched it with her fingertips. It was supposed to rock back and forth, but Marco hadn't gotten to the little mechanism that allowed it to do that. It was stuck, always in-between.

"I missed the way you smell," Marco told her, and he gathered her up in his arms and Naomi let him because he looked just like her husband. "Ocean only smells one way," he muttered into her hair. "All sorts of smells on you. I can smell the blood in your heart. In here." He laid one hand flat against the little rises and falls of her rib bones.

He tasted of salt. Not human sweat-salt, but like a spoonful of it. Naomi half-expected to see him melting in the places where her mouth had been.

He took her into the bedroom she had shared with her husband. Naomi began to lift her housedress over her head, but she stopped when she saw he was just standing there,

not undoing his shirt or trousers like he usually would. He was waiting for her, she realized. As if he didn't know how.

"I'm sorry," he said again, as she unhooked button after button, concentrating on them real hard because her hands had started shaking.

He was very cold. His skin was cold, his breath made clouds in the air. She felt frozen underneath him. She watched her own skin turn bone white and then pale blue, like it was happening to someone else. Her body didn't know him, she didn't open up and welcome him. It wasn't like with Marco at all.

When he was done, he lay still on top of her, his arms spread out over hers. For a moment, she was afraid he was going to want to stay like that all night. Marco had been terrible about stealing the covers and he used to throw his leg over hers in the night. But Naomi didn't know how she was going to sleep with all that cold heaviness on her. She could hardly breathe.

She reached out, touched his hair and grazed her fingernails over the place where his hairline vanished into his neck. When she used to do that to Marco, he would shiver all over. And she, lying close, would be able to feel the brittle gooseflesh that rose up on him. "What are you?" she asked him.

"I'm . . . a wish," he answered. And then she must have slept, because the next thing she knew, it was morning and the sun was coming in orange through the windows. She'd slept away a whole afternoon and night.

Sixteen days later, the letter came, telling all about when and how Marco had died. Nine months later, Naomi's only daughter, Mala, was born.

There was all sorts of nasty talk in town about Marco's best friend Eli or the teacher up to the school, Mr. Brubaker. But those of us who knew Naomi and had heard the story firsthand, never did but believe her. The strangest thing, she said, was how in the morning there was no sign of the man-

shaped thing. Except for a little pile of white salt on the undisturbed quilt next to her. I saw it for myself, almost a handful of big, coarse grains. It looked like sea-salt.

I am sad to say that Mala never got much love from this island or the folks on it. Not even when she was just a little thing. In school, she got a reputation for hissing like a cat, and for biting, even though she only did that the one time. At lunchtime, she sat alone on the low slope of the outhouse roof reading something stolen from the school library. Once or twice some shiny young teacher would try to pull her down, but all they ever got was pine cones thrown at their heads.

Most every day, a group of tough boys, mean-mouthed boys used to chase her all the way home. But they were noisy, beating the underbrush with hasty-cut switches and they were slow. They seldom caught her.

When they did, Mala went to her mother and submitted to her tender doctoring. It probably wasn't right, but Naomi almost relished those days. Normally, Mala was prickly as a burdock and it was only in the cleaning of scrapes, the bandaging of cuts, that Mala allowed her mother to touch her at all.

Naomi was a sad woman. She still missed Marco every day, and it was so fierce even after all those years that she sometimes wondered if a person could have an abscess in their heart as her grandfather had in his leg. Something that only pretended to heal for a little while but always opened up once again and wept. Sometimes, she went down to the shore and did watercolor pictures of the water and lighthouse and she missed Marco while she hung them up and she missed Marco while she stirred the stew for dinner and she missed Marco when she kissed their baby goodnight and then she crawled into her empty bed and missed him all night long.

If Mala were more like other children, if she gave hugs and kisses and laughed more and frowned less, Naomi might well have been a bit more cheerful. If Mala was a little easier to understand, Naomi might have loved her easier. But no one could ever love a child *more*. And as Mala grew up and Naomi grew older, she learned to be grateful for her odd girl. Mala, after all, would never marry and leave her alone. Mala would never leave the island for a job in the cities. Mala wouldn't ever get so old that she didn't still need her mother to take care of her, even if it was only in the smallest ways.

And the years went on and Mala wasn't a child no more and they lived together in that little cottage and made an island of themselves. That, more or less, was how things were going along before the story men came.

Dr. Benjamin wasn't a real doctor. Not the kind that heals people, though we could have used one of that sort. He was just another man writing things down in notebooks, but "Doctor" was how he introduced himself and that's how his men always called him, so didn't none of us argue with it.

By then, we were used to people like him coming to the island to study it. Sometimes it was the birds or the trees or the sand or even the tides. As if there was anything to know about tides that any one of us couldn't have told them. But Dr. Benjamin came to the island to study us.

We took to calling it the Story Eater, that machine he brought along with him. It had a metal horn on one end, like the blossom of a lily flower, and a big wheel of yellowed wax around the bottom. "Going down to the shore," we'd say to one another, "gotta feed the Eater." And then we'd take the skinny black path down to the water's edge, where Dr. Benjamin and his people were living in their white tents, stakes drove deep into the ground like they meant to stay.

From me, Dr. Benjamin got a story about Mama Lavalie, who steals the breath from the lungs of babies, among other things. Naomi gave him the one about the cookie jar, like I said. Others told about witches and ghosts and their own

lives, whatever he wanted to hear. And Dr. Benjamin wanted to hear everything. The Eater was always hungry.

It was curiosity that drove most people down the shore to him, and perseverance. Look at any manner of strangeness long enough and it starts to become the shape of the land. By the time Dr. Benjamin had been camped out for half a year, those tents might have grown there, or washed in from the sea.

Dr. Benjamin came in the spring, an odd and gentle one for us. He stayed on through the summer and into the fall and, after a while, we stopped expecting him to leave. He got to be such an accepted sight that we was all just as surprised as him when the first big squall of winter came in and near washed him out to sea.

It poured miserable, dashing, sideways rain for hours on end. The sky boomed and lit up yellow with lightning. Dr. Benjamin's tents collapsed under the weight of that water, spilling and gathering in them like in a woman's burdened apron. Or else they just blew right out of the sand. Dr. Benjamin, he was running, running, running back and forth from one tent to another, trying to save his Story Eater and those pasty wax circles he's spent so long collecting. He was piling them all up in an alcove on the sea wall and, once, he looked up. Mala was sitting there on the top of the wall. She wasn't wearing a rain slicker or even shoes and she was just looking at him like he was a rat, like he was a bug. Like he was something with too many eyes and too many legs and all she wanted to know was what ridiculous thing he was going to do next.

"Can you help me?" he shouted over the wind. His men were running forward and backward around him, like water flowing around a stone. Later, he would think it was funny how no one seemed to take notice of the girl on the wall.

Mala didn't say anything to him. He stayed too long, looking up at her studying face. Eventually, he ran back to his tent, filled up his arms with more stories and tried to

protect them with his own body as he ran. Mala on the wall didn't move.

In the end, it wasn't so great a loss as it might have been. A few of the wax wheels were ruined but most survived. And in those days after the storm, Dr. Benjamin spent most of his time writing lists of everything he was missing and making plans to build shelters more stout and more permanent. There was nothing gone that could not be replaced.

He called up on Bethel Ellison special, asked him to come down and "sit for him." It was because Ellison's wax wheel had been destroyed, of course we knew that. But Bethel still walked with a bit of a spring in his step down the black rock way. He was the only one, after all, that Dr. Benjamin had asked back personally. It must have been a memorable story.

When he got there, it was almost exactly like before. They'd set up the tent again and Dr. Benjamin had his little wooden desk (the wood was soft and splitting down by the legs now, though). All the wax wheels were stacked up behind him still, but now they were uneven and jumbled, listing into each other. And there was Mala. She was just standing in the corner, not looking at anything in particular. Dr. Benjamin didn't say anything and Bethel didn't say anything and it was like she was a lamp or a table.

Dr. Benjamin said what he always did: "What would you like to share today?"

But of course old Bethel knew that he wanted the story he'd lost. It was the one about him and his father and the little drowned boy that they found in the harbor. More than forty years out from it, and Bethel still remembered the way the boy's shirt had slid and slid against his hands. And the sick swooping in his stomach when he realized that it wasn't just the boy's clothes, but his skin that had come undone and was sliding around.

He tried to tell his tale just as he done before. It was one he had shared often enough to have a bit of a speech for it. He knew the edges of it the way he might have learned to

understand a table or a chair that had sat in his home for a lifetime.

When he was done, he turned and walked past Mala on his way out, and he was none too happy with that. Island folk didn't see much of Mala and, even those of us kindly disposed towards her would have admitted that we liked it that way. More unsettling still, as he passed her by, Mala stuck out her hand like the two of them had just done a deal. Too surprised to do anything else, Bethel shook her hand. He made a choked noise in his throat, though, and dropped it quick like a burning thing. Bethel left without looking back. When he was gone, Mala turned to Dr. Benjamin. "Do you want to know a better story about him?" she asked.

"Pardon me?" asked Dr. Benjamin. Two days earlier, Mala had become a regular in the tent. She came in the mornings with the first light and left around sunset. She wouldn't answer any of Dr. Benjamin's questions and she just watched while they filed in, told their stories, filed back out again. At first, he was surprised that we was all speaking so frank in front of her like that. But then Dr. Benjamin realized that Mala was like his white tents. We'd had a lot of practice putting her aside in our minds.

"You asked me to help you. And you want the best stories, right?" Mala asked. Dr. Benjamin gestured for her to take a seat in the story chair in front of him. Mala did so. For the first time since he'd seen her on the wall, there was something uncertain in her.

"Are you going to turn on your machine?" she asked.

"I'd like to," Dr. Benjamin admitted. "But I won't if you don't want me to." That was something he had discovered early on: people thinking they was running the show was a hell of a lot more important than people actually running the show.

She looked past him at the Story Eater. "Turn it on," she said.

Mala sat very still. Most people telling stories waved their hands, slid them over one another. Most of them flicked their eyes around, looking at Dr. Benjamin and then at the tent walls and then at their own lap. Mala just looked at the Story Eater, watching it draw the shape of her words in the soft wax. And she said:

“When Bethel Ellison was seventeen years old, he married a lady older than himself. When she was eight months gone with her first child, her best friend Annet Davis came to Bethel and confessed to him that the child was not his, belonged to a boy who did odd jobs down in the marina between benders. Bethel’s wife had always loved him, Annet said, and her parents had forbid her to marry him.

“Bethel trusted Annet, but his wife was a fine thing. Prettiest girl in the village by far and he was a young man, just starting out and it was quite a thing for him to have her. That all meant little, of course, if she carried another man’s child in her belly. That was like having a handful of sand. And so Bethel waited.

“A baby, a girl eventually called Nivi, was born easy, especially for a first child. Bethel did not ask to hold her. Instead, he drew the midwife aside. She was a wise woman as well as a midwife, as many are. Bethel explained himself, his doubts, and asked her to divine the truth for him.

“When Nivi was fourteen minutes old, the midwife pricked the skin on her new little palm with a silver needle until it bled. She was not concerned with her caterwauling. Blood welled up and the midwife swirled it on her own index finger. She pushed her finger into her mouth and tasted the blood with a thinking, close-faced look. Then she turned to Bethel with her needle in hand.

“Bethel knew even before the midwife began to shake her head.

“When she was gone and the house was quiet and the sun had sunk, he took Nivi’s mother bleeding and sobbing from her childbed. He drowned her in the dark green water where

the sea met up with the land. He told everyone she had succumbed to the kind of madness that strikes new mothers, that she'd slipped out of the house like a sleepwalker, that he'd found her himself in the surf the next morning. When he told the story, he thought of a dead boy he'd once pulled from the water. He remembered his cold blue skin and the way he was ragged and swollen, worried at by fish. In that way, he contrived to cry.

"Most believed him. Those who did not had an idea about the baby she'd carried and they knew that those sorts of women generally came to one bad end or another. Mostly, there was the question of the baby, whom Bethel had still not named. No one would blame him, he knew, if he didn't keep her. He was a man alone and very young still. His house was no place for a little helpless thing.

"He gave her to Parson Clarent, who had taken in others of her kind. There were no secrets for Nivi about where she had come from. But she knew in an unspoken way that she must never come to Bethel, for aid or for information or any sort of familiarity at all. Outside, of course, what was to be considered reasonable between neighbors.

"She saw him as she grew. In the pews on Sunday, down to the shops with the other men. But she had rarely ever spoken more than two words to him. He never remarried. As she grew, she collected the whispers of others, the suspicions that never quite materialized into words.

"And so Nivi looked at Bethel with interest. Was it his hands, his ordinary brown hands, that had pushed her mother's head down under the water? Had he watched her hair and her skirts floating and the bubbles dying? She didn't know if she hated him. After all, she had not known her mother. Perhaps spending her childhood with a slut and a cuckold would have been worse than the parson's house where the only sounds were catechisms being recited.

"But sometimes when Nivi looked at him, across a street or over the top of a hymnal, she thought he looked sad.

Sometimes, Bethel looked back at her and he thought about the soft, liquid sound of her, the shift and stretch he had felt with his head resting easy against his wife's round belly."

Dr. Benjamin stared at Mala, letting the Eater's needle run around and around, drawing nothing in the yellow wax. Unthinking fingers reached into his pocket, brought out a red and white hard candy in crinkly cello-paper. He popped it into his mouth and sucked thoughtfully.

"How do you know that story, Miss?" he asked Mala.

Mala hesitated. "I . . . like stories. I'm a good reader."

"But, I mean, did he tell you those things? He couldn't have, could he?"

Mala gestured towards the spinning Eater. It broke Dr. Benjamin out of his spell and he dashed for the machine, shutting it off all afumble-fingers.

"Would you like more?" Mala asked him. "I can get you more."

Dr. Benjamin rested his hand on top of the Eater, like it was a little child that needed his comforting. "Yes, I'd like that very much."

The last time the mean-mouthed boys chased Mala, she was thirteen. She hadn't started her bleed yet, but she had the look of a young woman already. She was tall, like Marco and she had a round bottom like her Mama had. If she wasn't Mala, the boys might have chased her in a different sort of way.

The Ferris boy was running after her and that whole family was trash, washed in like scum from the sea. He called out "hiiii-ya!" and smacked the heads off flowers with a stick as he went. He only got Mala because he jumped her from the low branch of a tree.

"What now, Spazzy?" he sneered, holding her arms down and driving his elbows into her ribcage.

Mala didn't give him no words, just snarled and kicked at him. First, he set to fighting her, laughing and forcing her

into the dirt with his knees and all the sharp points of him. Then, as Mala watched, something funny moved over his face.

He moved his knee along Mala's leg, high up on her thigh. His face looked strange; scared, even. Like he was the one being held down.

And this is what Mala learned:

The Ferris boy's father was a mean drunk. He couldn't keep a position on a boat; he messed around with the wives of men at sea. He never had a kind word or a soft touch for his wife or any of his three boys.

"I am your father," he used to tell the Ferris boy, who was the oldest boy. "I'm owed."

The Ferris boy did a man's work around the place. He chopped wood and repaired the cottage in winter. He tore his hands and bent his back down at the docks, picking up odd jobs for small sums, all to pay back that bottomless debt he owed just for being born.

"Don't go out in the Midsummer night," his mother told him every year. "Mama Lavalie walks and she's taking folks to fill out her court."

"Don't go out in the Midsummer night," she reminded him when he was ten. She said it with a rich purple bruise on the side of her face, a little crusting of blood left over because it hurt too much to wipe away. The Ferris boy looked at the table set with mealy bread, thin soup, all that left to them.

He worked so hard, almost wore through his little bones. He raised more money that week than he'd seen in his whole life. It was like a kind of dying, handing it over to the man who imported the fancy liquor.

Yellow whiskey, the color of amber beads like ladies on the mainland wore. A whole bottle of it. He gave it to his father and said it was to repay him. Already in his cups, the man could only nod. It was just what he knew himself to deserve. The Ferris boy looked at him and he'd never hated a thing so much.

The Ferris boy left his father reclining on the lawn, with the glass bottle crooked in his arm, held more tenderly than he'd ever held his own babies. The Ferris boy locked the windows and the doors. He sat up all night.

When the pounding came, the shouting, the cursing and the screaming, the Ferris boy sat and waited. His mother woke up and sat beside him. She didn't make no moves for the door. She brought him a blanket for his shoulders and wrapped it around him like he was still a child.

The boy never saw his father again. The Ferrises ate better after that.

While Mala was learning this, the Ferris boy was crushing her with his chest, pushing against her and making strange little noises in the back of his throat. But he'd been dumb and thrown his stick away where Mala could reach for it. One end, broken carelessly off a tree, came to a mean point.

Mala stabbed him deep in the thigh. "Don't you ever touch me again," she said, standing over him while he screamed. "None of you. None of you touch me." Mala brandished the stick to show she meant business. "I can tell them what you did."

Those boys never did chase Mala again and, from then on, she read fewer books and watched her classmates instead.

On her way home from Dr. Benjamin's tents, Mala took the long way through town. She walked through the fruit stands and fish vendors and she spread out her hands and her fingers, just a little bit, not so much that you'd notice.

When she got home, Naomi asked her what she'd done that day and Mala said: "Nothing."

Mala filled six wax wheels by herself. She ruled the tent, coming the morning and not leaving until the dark of the night. And she talked the whole time, only stopping every once in a while to sip a little of the water or the clear liquor that Dr. Benjamin offered her.

She uncovered her neighbors, all their little sins and triumphs. She delighted in secrets, in sacreds, and Dr. Benjamin delighted in her. When she spoke, Mala lit up like a candle in a windstorm, she flickered and bent and danced and seemed to inhabit all the shapes of her stories. Mala, she was a thing to see.

But our island is a small one. Filling all day, every day with stories . . . sooner or later, Mala was going to run out. Dr. Benjamin could see she'd started to slack her pace. The stories she picked now were less bitter and less vibrant. Mala herself didn't seem so struck by them. She was reaching the end of her supply and that scared the Doctor.

"Mala," he said once. It was night, the usual time that Mala would be leaving. "Would you sit next to me?" Dr. Benjamin pulled a chair over by his own. He'd been partaking of some of that clear liquor of his and that was the only way he'd gotten up the nerve to talk to her like that.

Mala looked at him for a long minute, because she wasn't in the habit of being hasty about much of anything. And then she circled round the table and sat next to him.

Dr. Benjamin looked at his hands. "Mala," he said, "do you like living here on the island?"

Mala was confused by the question because Mala wasn't real sure she liked living at all. It was just what she did. But Dr. Benjamin didn't seem to care that she didn't have no answer for him.

"Do you think . . . do you think you would like to live on the mainland? I could take you there. To the cities. There would be so many opportunities for someone with your gift."

"Gift," Mala repeated, like a magic spell. They were silent together for a moment. Dr. Benjamin drank.

"There are a lot of stories in the cities, aren't there?" Mala's books had all suggested that that was the case.

Dr. Benjamin smiled at her. He spread his hands expansively and when he brought them back down again, they rested on her shoulders. "Mala, in the cities, there are

so many stories that you couldn't tell them all even if you talked all day, every day until the end of your life."

That was the first time Dr. Benjamin ever saw Mala smile.

Dr. Benjamin smiled too, but nervously, like an apology. "Can I ask you something?" he whispered. Mala inclined her head. Dr. Benjamin laughed in that way that folk do when nothing is funny. "Could you . . . could you tell my story?"

Mala leaned forward. She looked seriously at Dr. Benjamin. He was not very old. She imagined his life in the city had been good and unexciting. But Mala was curious; Mala was always curious.

When she kissed him, he tasted cold and sweet. Peppermint, like his candies. She bet he tasted like that all the time. Maybe everyone in the cities did?

This is what Mala said:

"Once, you had a sister. She was much younger than you and you took care of her.

"You parents went away for a living. You and your sister used to run through the stone courtyard and pretend to be pirates. You had nannies and you had maids. But your sister had no one to play pirate with, except you. Even after you were too old for those kinds of games.

"One summer, your parents came home for weeks at a time. It was the longest you'd been with them in your whole life. They took you to the beach and you walked behind your sister in the waves and untangled green ribbons of kelp from in and out of her ankles. She had never seen the ocean before and she didn't even notice you, following along behind and making her safe.

"She died in the ocean, drank it and sank. That's what your parents and the doctors told you afterwards. She was a little girl, she could barely swim. There was nothing mysterious about it. But you could remember hands. Green, cold hands. They took your sister and you reached out for her but they were so much stronger than you were.

“Sometimes, in the summer nights, you would drag your hand down the sheets of your bed and remember the feeling of their fingers breaking your grip and pushing you away.

“The doctors told you to forget. Your parents told you to forget. They were going to send you to treatment. They were going to take you away from the house and the courtyard and all the small things that were left of her in the world. And so you learned to forget.

“You still spent your summers on the sea.

“The hands took her underneath for a princess. You thought for a princess. You could not remember if they ate human folk. But she was such a pretty little girl. How could they not want her? How could they not give her a crown and worship her? So you floated. Disconnected from her, you went up and up and up and up and rested on the top of the water.

“And in that moment, before your parents found you and pulled you back to shore, you relished it. That cool weightless ease of no one hanging on your hand. Later, you would wonder if you had called them with your wish so secret that you did not even tell it to yourself.

“They taught you to forget. Do you remember now?” Mala looked steady into Dr. Benjamin’s stricken face. Dr. Benjamin tasted salt. Too much, he leaned over the side of his chair and spat out on to the wooden floor. A streaked white pile landed there, salt warm and half-melted from the heat of his mouth. He could feel the tumbling grit of the few remaining grains on his tongue and in his teeth.

“I remember,” he said. So much salt and he thirsted from it.

Before Mala was born, Naomi didn’t paint. She used to draw in the little paper books her daddy would bring her back from the world, but painting wasn’t something she ever saw a woman do. After Mala, all sorts of things suddenly seemed possible and she was already an odd duck as far as the rest of us were concerned. So while another woman might have

spent her evenings knitting or sewing or reading, if there was books to be had, Naomi sat at her kitchen table and spread the white sheets of her sketches all around her.

Mala sat on the floor beside her and traced the grooves between the soft white boards. "Baby, do you think we should plant poppies alongside the house this year?" Naomi asked her girl. She did not expect an answer because that sort of thing wasn't of no concern to Mala, but we do all like to hear a human voice, even if it's our own.

Mala shrugged her shoulders. "I won't be here when they bloom."

Naomi laid down her sketch. Her charcoal pencil rolled in among the curls of her papers. "What?"

Mala tucked her pinky nail into the dark little crack between boards. "I'm going to go away," Mala said. Naomi shook her head without words, her mouth worked all useless. "The stories here . . . " Mala struggled to explain, "they're . . . dead now. He put them in his machine. I need to find new ones."

"Mala," Naomi made her voice low and reasonable, "you can't leave. You don't know how to take care of yourself. People will hurt you." Mala just stared, thinking about those boys who chased her. Hurting was everywhere.

Naomi's voice rose, her eyes got bright, like black stones washed in with the tide and glistening. "Mala, you need me. I'm your mother, no one else is going to care for you."

"There's nothing here anymore," said Mala.

"I'm here." Naomi choked a little on the words. She could feel her heart beating hard in her throat and her chest, it was like panic, it was like fighting. If Mala had apologized, or reached out for her mother's hand, she might have soothed some torn-up thing inside Naomi. But that wasn't in Mala's nature. Instead she just looked at her mother with that flat stare, like she was looking through her. That look of hers that always said there wasn't anything to see.

“You’re not even a person!” Naomi screamed it, she stalked into the kitchen and opened one of the wooden cupboards so hard it made a slam-crash noise against the other cabinets. She threw a glass vial at Mala, stopped up on one end with cork. It hit the floor in front of her and the stopper tumbled out. White grains spilled out, some landed on the floorboards, some on Mala’s skin. “That’s all you are.” Naomi was shaking, Naomi was white. Naomi held on to herself with both arms.

Six little grains clustered on Mala’s bare knee. She licked her index finger, scooped them up. She pressed them against her tongue.

“They’re hollow inside. They’re made of breath and dust and sea water. They can’t have anything heavy inside of them, it falls through their body and rips them apart so they must be remade. But they can carry things for a little while.

“My daddy sank like your sister. He was a fisherman. When he died, he was thinking about the lines he’d left dragging out in the water. He was thinking about the fish, creeping through them, sides jeweled.

“The demons like to look at the dead fisherman. They sink for a time and the demons float underneath them, let their cold bodies pass through them. For a moment, when that human skin passes through their hollow dust, it is like a pulse.

“The demon took my father’s kiss. Touched his hair and his shoulders and rode on his hips, wearing my mother’s face. Kissed him goodbye, tasted his breath, smelled his blood.

“Like each empty thing they ache. For a while, they hold life inside of them. It grows, it pushes, it warms and insists. They hold on for as long as they can, but it will weigh them down. It’s too heavy. It would tear them, you see?

“The demon brought me to my mother. When I was gone—just the smallest seed of me—the demon felt weightless. It

could sink back into the sea and watch for the dead fisherman again. Without me, the demon was bereft; but the demon was wise. The demon knew that I had never belonged inside it. I'd only just rested there for a while."

Long after dark, Mala climbed into Naomi's bed. It was the first time something warm and living had lain next to her since Marco'd left for the sea. For a minute, Mala just rested and drew breath in and out and let her mother listen to the sound.

"Please don't leave me alone," Naomi said eventually, her voice got little and teary. "You're mine. You're my wish."

Because she wasn't a cruel girl, Mala stretched out her arms and awkwardly enfolded her mother. She touched her only gingerly, as if it burned or buzzed, but she touched her. "I'm mine," she said.

Naomi pressed her face into the bend of Mala's arm, drawing warmth and something like comfort from the girl. "Momma?" Mala hadn't called her that, hadn't called her anything since she was just a little thing. "Would you like to hear a story?"

Naomi took to weeping, salt water on her daughter's skin.

Man in Blue Overcoat

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Does the Devil ride the train? Her mother says the Devil comes to town on a black mare, taking care to hide his hoofs from sight and conceal the hellfire in his eyes. But if the Devil is unnaturally handsome—and in Mother’s dire stories, he is—then the man in the blue overcoat who just stepped off the five o’clock train from Miraflores fits the bill.

Eloisa forgets that she is in the station waiting for her cousins. She stands on her tiptoes, no longer scanning the crowd for signs of the boys, instead trying to catch another glimpse of the man. And then, there, before she can grasp how, he is suddenly stopping right in front of her and taking off his hat.

“Good day, miss,” he says.

He puts his hat on again, leans on a cane and she notices a metal brace running up his left leg. A war injury? Is this some former revolutionary? Or does he have the extremities of a goat, as Mother warned her?

Mother, who runs a small pension and never lets the boys lodging there speak to her. Mother, who threw a fit when she caught her looking at a movie magazine showing women with short hair. Bald sluts. Bad girls.

“Say, do you know what the fuss is all about? This place is packed like a can of sardines and I can’t find an automobile to drive me to El Monte.”

Eloisa frowns. “Don’t you know? Tonight is the feast of San Rafael.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“They take the statue of the saint on a procession around town, then sit him down in front of the church. There’s fireworks and music.”

And dancing. Most of all there is dancing. Even though Eloisa is a young woman, she has not been allowed to participate in the festivities. But this year is different. Her cousins are coming to visit and Mother says they can all go together to see the fireworks.

“It sounds delightfully pagan to me. What’s your name?”

For some reason she has a childish impulse to lie, to deny herself. Why? What does a name matter?

“Eloisa.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have an automobile, would you Eloisa?”

“No.”

“Too bad,” he says. “Hey, would you know of a place I can stay? If I can’t get an automobile I’ll need a room.”

There’s an empty room in her mother’s pension. Mother normally rooms men who work at the glass factory, but one of the boys has gone off and married, leaving his room behind just two weeks ago.

However, she knows exactly how it’ll look if she returns home with a man—a devil, perhaps—in tow, after Mother instructed her not to speak to any strangers. Mother, who is even angry when she reads poetry—Father’s old books, the skeletal remains of his collection. Harmless words which deserve a beating. And why won’t Eloisa do something useful rather than sit on the front steps of the house, daydreaming. Nothing good comes out of poetry and daydreams and girls who think so will soon be carted off by the Devil.

“You won’t find a room, not with the festival tonight. Everyone has come for the festival,” she says.

He smiles, as though he can tell she is lying and Eloisa feels a shiver go through her body, as if she’s just jumped into a pond.

“Well, then, I must find a mule or a cart or some way to El Monte. Take care, miss.”

With that he grabs the small suitcase he had set on the ground and the cane, limping merrily away.

Eloisa and her cousins, Mother in tow, go to the town square. Eloisa is not allowed to wear ribbons in her hair, she is not even allowed to wear a nice dress. Grey are her colours and Mother is always in black, though Father passed away nearly seven years ago. But it doesn't matter for there are purple, yellow, and white papers adorning the buildings around the square and plenty of colour in the jackets and the skirts of the attendants. Colour in the shaved ices the children carry and the handkerchiefs peeking from suit pockets and the flowers laid before the feet of San Rafael.

Mother plops herself on a chair next to some old ladies and refuses to dance, but she agrees that Eloisa may walk around the square—even dance—as long as she partners with one of her cousins.

For a little while it is this way, she walks with a cousin on each side and they chatter and laugh. But eventually a couple of girls catch the boys' fancy and even though they are not supposed to, they scatter away to dance with them while Eloisa steps back, standing under the arches that frame the town square.

“You were right. There is no way out of town. Not a blasted automobile for miles around and apparently mules are also scarce.”

The man in the blue overcoat is just a few paces from her. His coat is so very bright, it seems to light up the space around him, making the shadows of the arches recede. Like a moth, she drifts to his side.

“It's the festival,” she says. “Tomorrow you can ask one of the townsfolk to lend you a horse.”

“I'll be damned if I can ride it. I'm a city boy, I ride the trams.”

She chuckles for it's an odd thing to discover that the Devil does not ride horses, after all.

"You find my predicament amusing?" he asks, smiling.

"No. So you have a place to stay for tonight?"

"Something of the sort."

She nods. He checks his pocket watch and she wonders if the rule is true and he must leave by the time the cock crows. Because that's how it goes. The Devil rides into town, he asks a vain girl to dance and she dances—ignoring the warnings, never bothering to look at his feet—and when the cock crows he vanishes and she is singed. Hair burnt off, body smelling like sulphur.

Girls like that always end insane or dead.

She stares at him. He cocks his head a bit.

"What?"

"They say the Devil comes into town on dance nights."

"Does he? How do you know?"

"You recognize him by his hoofs."

"It's a good thing I'm not dancing, then," he says, lifting his cane.

"Were you a soldier?"

"No. I'm the Devil, remember?"

He's making fun of her and she likes it. The lightness of his words and how he smiles.

She spots her mother coming across the square, fury in her eyes. She's seen her. She knows Eloisa is not in the company of her cousins. If there's a hell, Eloisa is about to enter it and though she should stare limply at the ground, accepting her punishment, something stronger than fear ignites her body.

She grabs the man's hand and pulls him with her.

"Come," she says. They rush through the narrow alleys. He moves fast for a man with a limp and his steps seem to draw no echoes. Her own footsteps are as loud as drums.

When she stops to catch her breath he is laughing. The crackling of the fireworks echoes through the town. A dry,

sour smell drifts through the air. Burning sulphur, the gunpowder that has gone off in the fireworks.

"That was my mother," she explains. "She wouldn't want us talking."

"Is she some evil stepmother who has you locked in a tower?"

"Sometimes."

"Here, want to see a castle?" he asks and it is his turn to grab her by the hand.

They arrive at the heavy doors of a large house and Eloisa frowns.

"That's Mr. Carrasco's home. He's off in Mexico City until winter time."

The man looks like he already knows this and he opens the door, walking into the house. Eloisa pauses at the threshold. Is this magic? Or is she in the company of a common thief who picked a lock and made himself a bed for the night?

Eloisa steps inside. She can't see a thing, but he grabs her firmly and guides her through the rooms as though he can see in the dark. He stops and lets go for a moment. A light blooms and he sets a lantern on a table. The furniture around them is covered with white sheets. The man pulls a sheet and reveals a couch.

They sit there while the dim noise of the fireworks seeps in through the cracks.

"What do you do in your tower, Eloisa?" he asks, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling.

"It's hardly a tower. It's just a little house. A pension. I do the things everyone does."

"What does everyone do?"

"Help with the household chores. Read."

"Anything good?"

"Poetry."

"I only read the papers," he says.

He proceeds to ask more questions, tugging stories out of her until she has laid her whole life before him: the town, her home, her relatives. It strikes her then that he is at an advantage and has revealed nothing, only vague hints which hover like smoke for a moment, then dissipate.

"I don't know your name," she says.

"Don't have one," he replies, sounding earnest. "You can make one up for me."

"Really."

"Give it a try."

"How about . . . Abelardo."

"Eloisa and Abelardo. Isn't that a love story?" he asks. "I think it has a nasty ending."

It's one of many tragic stories she found in her father's books, amongst the silverfish. Great loves and great rhymes, a pressed flower—forgotten, left behind—to mark the pages. All those pages which her mother despised because her old man had been good for nothing, always with his head in the clouds and when he died, they had to turn the house into a pension to survive. One of these days, Mother said, one of these days you're going to take a wrong step and break your neck from staring at the clouds. Eloisa is certain this is precisely one of those days.

"I suppose," she says.

He drifts closer and without a word plants a light, chaste kiss on her mouth. He smiles at her when he draws back, then repeats the motion. Lingered this time. Nothing chaste about it. His hand brushes her cheek. She wonders if she should slap him. That's what she *should* do. But she also *shouldn't* be here at all, shouldn't talk to men she knows nothing about.

She feels warm, like the conflagration she was warned about—you'll burn in hell, the Devil will take you away to writhe in scorching agony for all eternity—is really engulfing her. If the stories are right, she'll burst into flames and perish.

Eloisa frowns.

"Can I look at your feet?" she asks, though really, she'd rather not. But she has to see.

"To make sure I'm not the Devil in disguise?" he asks.

She stares at him. The smirk on his face fades. His eyes, now that she looks at them carefully, gleam with the hellfire Mother warned her about.

"If I do and I'm the Devil," he says, carefully removing the right boot, fingers slow, "then what happens next is you'll scream. The house will mysteriously catch fire . . ."

He stands up, switches his attention to the left leg. He works on the metal brace, removing the straps that attach it to the boot.

" . . . and only ashes will remain to mark the place. A memory of a folly. Yeah, I've heard the story."

He takes off the boot, rolls up the pants legs and reveals a hideously scarred foot. Instead of five toes there are three, with dark nails resembling claws.

"Are you going to scream?"

She raises a hand and begins unbuttoning the grey dress. Eloisa stares at him and he shakes his head in a vague gesture she can't recognize. He mirrors her, removing the coat, his shirt and vest, his trousers. His leg is completely scarred, as is his torso. Ugly, puckered marks mar his skin, reaching the neck. Burn marks.

She steps forward, kissing the spot where his neck meets with his shoulder.

Ghost light intrudes through a gap in the curtains, waking her. She is on a sofa, naked, covered only by a blue overcoat. After Eloisa dresses, she looks for him, knowing already he's left the house for it's cold inside, as though frost has fallen.

She walks back to the town square, which is littered with dozens of paper flowers from the night before. The church is a few paces away. Or she could spin west, to her house.

Eloisa thrusts her hands in her coat pockets and walks to the silent train station, sitting on one of the wooden benches and surveying the tracks, which seem to go on forever in this hazy dawn. The station's clock ticks and she observes the big hand move. Black like the man's eyes.

And she already knows she is going to become a cautionary tale for other girls in town.

They'll say the Devil rides into town on a train. They'll say to watch out for men in blue overcoats.

The taste of ashes coats her tongue.

And she closes her eyes, smiling.

And there is the loud toot of a horn, making her frown and look at the source of the noise. That's Mr. Carrasco's automobile, glossy, inky black. It raises a cloud of dirt as it suddenly halts.

"I'm heading to El Monte and I can't ride a horse. Can you point the way?" he asks, as casual as casual can be.

"Did you steal that car?"

"Well, you stole my coat. Can I have it back?"

She crosses the tracks and tosses the overcoat into the back, then climbs in.

This Is Not a Love Story

Nicole Kornher-Stace

Fool girl, what's in your head?
Tell me, did you think to have
a meringue dress, a picket fence,
fat babies with your husband's eyes?
Hypocrite, I've seen you:
blowing kisses to the greenwood,
flashing flat tits at the wind.
Hush up. Save your blushes. Listen.
You'd wear all the wide world's iron shoes to rust
halt and faltering, blood-footed, nub-footed.
I know. You'd hold fast to what you fight for,
although it—wolf, serpent, flame—
test your grip, your heart, your mind,
to breaking. Girl, you read too much.
Books lie. They promise happiness
to daughters who shun quests (the sport of sons)
and keep to paths, who peek under the bed for monsters
hoping to find nothing there but dust.

(There's a heap of old skirts on the doorstep
and a trail of old blood down the hall
There are bones, fleshed and gnawed, in the kitchen
and skins tucked like new babes in the beds
There's a tangle of lockets, gummed shut
on pale portraits of quest-orphaned sons)

Fool girl, what's in your heart?
Tell me, did you think to find

some incubus to barter for your firstborn
in the sallow grass, some ghost to haunt
your bridal bed, lying between you
and your husband like a sword?
Hypocrite, I've heard you:
wishing you could bite your heart in two,
tiptoeing indecision like a wire.
Don't you backtalk me. I once was young.
My text was flesh, was dreams, was salt. I learned
of love (like childbirth, not pain so much as work)
and lust (better a monster's dedication than an angel's
disregard)
and fascination (some are doomed to wander, some to
stay).

Girl, you dream too much. Dreams worry at
your wounds. They take. Then dart
like startled fishes from your opened eyes.
All your wealth is acorns in the light.

(You will know him from his voice like a crossroads
and his eyes of blue, brown, hazel, green
You will know him from his heart like an owl pellet
spiked with eyeteeth, wristbones, maidenheads
You will know him from his smell like gallows new-built
like trespass, like wrack, like homecoming)

Fool girl, what's in your hands?
Tell me, did you think to best
all otherworldly pull with knots and iron gauds,
all domesticity with resignation?
Hypocrite, I know you:
bending your neck to darning needles,
oven mitts, will not unmoor your heart
before it founders; waiting nightlong
in the faery rings probably won't
earn you more than chills.

Gently, sweetling. Dry your eyes.
You'll not follow this old woman into dotage
or your sisters into madness and
an early grave: don't your books teach
it is the lot of wayward daughters
to unriddle and to wander; that
the only thing worth questing for
is the wherewithal to choose?

The White Prince

Orrin Grey

At night, then, it came crawling through Miss Anna's open window. A pale thing. I doubt it ever had seen the sun.

Why did she accept its embrace and not my own? By the time we knew the truth, she was already far gone, and her shame sealed her torn lips with silence. Neither would she speak to me, one of her suitors, nor to Peter, her fiancé. Visiting Dr. von Stane attended her that last night. Afterward, he pulled me aside and told me that, delirious, she pleaded for her "alabaster prince."

That final night we all waited: Peter crouched in her wardrobe, the rest of us in the next room. Lights hooded, hands sweating on the hafts of spears cut from the ash trees found down by the stream, listening for the sounds of its ascent. I thought I heard a wet sound, as if something damp slapped at the walls of the manor. We had to wait to be sure, wait until we saw the hideous outline set against the moonlight streaming through the open window, until it had slumped into the room and was almost upon her bed, as it had been now for how many nights. Only then did we reveal our lanterns and spring into the room.

Its bulbous eyes grew wide, swiveling in a batrachian face, as it peered at us. It was Peter who drove in the spear, piercing the damp, fleshy bag of the thing's body. It made a sound, not quite a dog's bark, and it stumbled back, its long fingers with their sucking pads reaching feebly for my friend, who drew away in terror. The ungainly creature flopped for a moment, then disappeared out the window.

The gardener was the first to the ground, and found the spot where the body had fallen, the grass crushed flat and smeared with blood. Even in the dark we could see the trail it left, spatters of crimson that showed black in the lantern light. Peter's father, Sir Godfrey, organized the party to hunt it down. Peter wanted to go, demanded to go, but Dr. von Stane laid his hand on Peter's arm and said, "Anna needs you here, now more than ever," and so Peter stayed behind.

The good doctor, Sir Godfrey, and I went out, along with the gardener and two of the stablehands. We armed ourselves with lanterns and spears, shotguns and revolvers, though I don't know if any of us really believed that the guns would do us much good against our quarry. Sir Godfrey brought along the hatchet from the woodpile behind the house.

We followed the trail into the woods that bordered the property, past a stream where the rocks were spattered with blood. One of the stablehands said something about how it "couldnae a got far, leakin' like that," but I thought of how bloated it had been, and wondered how much blood it could keep in that sack-like body, how much it could do without.

During the whole affair, no one had ever uttered the word "vampyre," not even Dr. von Stane, who told us to cut the branches from only the ash and sharpen them into long stakes. But all of us had read Mr. Stoker's work published the prior year and I doubt I was alone in my thinking. But then, was it really blood it took from frail Anna, those nights when it oozed into her bed? I had been the one who caught them together, I in my bold—dare I even admit, untoward—mission to change her mind about marrying Peter. I had seen it atop her, seen her hands caressing its clammy flesh. Certainly, though, it was taking *something* from her, for she had been wasting away before our very eyes, dying in front of us even as her countenance took on the glow of a girl newly in love.

As we trudged after the wounded creature through the dew-wet undergrowth of the forest, I knew that Anna would be dead before we returned. I had seen it in Dr. von Stane's eyes as we left. We were too late to save her, and now we were simply executioners, carrying out a sentence.

We found the cave among the moss-grown ruins of a monastery that had long since fallen to scattered stones. "Good Lord," Sir Godfrey said as we stood in a semicircle around the dark opening, scarcely larger than a pantry door. "I used to play near here when I was a boy. There were stories, but none of us believed . . ." His words died with a sigh.

One by one we crept into the dank, dripping tunnel, which seemed half-natural, though here and there hewn stones showed old carvings of monks with their heads bowed in prayer. We kept our spears before us, and our guns near at hand, moving like men hunting a bear, though what we found was something already half-dead, collapsed upon some ancient crypt, its moist skin heaving as it struggled to breathe. For all its inhumanity, it looked less a hideous supernatural creature, and more just a dying animal, but our disgust and pity were worse than our fear, and it was only a moment before one of the stablehands drove in his spear once, and then again. Sir Godfrey followed suit, and I stood and held the lantern aloft so they could see to do their grisly work.

As the thing died, it reached up and its spidery fingers found my wrist. I trembled, as if in forbidden pleasure, and saw not the ghastly creature I had seen before, but a youth, pale and frightened, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "Please," he said, his voice cracking, "please help me." Then Sir Godfrey brought down the hatchet, and severed his head.

I didn't speak to the others of what I had seen, but I urged them to carry the body impaled on their spears and not to

touch it. We burned the remains on a pyre in the back garden, but only after Dr. von Stane had examined them carefully. He suggested that the creature must have exuded a toxin from its beslimed skin, perhaps a hallucinogen, like certain mushrooms. I thought of the boy I had seen, and remembered the fairy tale that we were all told as children, of the princess who kisses the frog and finds him transformed into a handsome prince. I watched the fire burn, and I shuddered.

Pira

Brad Strickland

The two oddly matched travelers had left the last furrowed field behind and were well under the canopy of Greenhallow Wood when Pira's ears were assaulted—and not for the first time—by Festo's broken, croaking tenor.

*Come hither, Love, and lie with me
Beneath the merry greenwood tree;
Bring a loaf of bread and a jug of wine—
Then show me yours, I'll show you mine!*

"Hush, Fool," Pira said.

Twisting in his saddle, Festo smiled back, as though acknowledging a compliment. "My lady enjoys music?"

"I'd sooner listen to your jackass braying."

"Say not so, Lady. The matter offends you, not the sound. The words are too taffeta and treacle for such serious business as ours. The second verse I've made much grimmer. Hear:

*If you, my Love, can't come to me
Beneath the merry greenwood tree,
At least send the loaf and jug of wine,
For my belly cleaves fast unto my spine!*

Pira did not smile. "Peace, Festo!"

"Peas?" the little man asked ruminatively. "I am not partial to legumes, Lady, but if we have no better provender —"

Pira silenced his prattle with a look dark as building thunder. Then, in a milder voice than before, she said, "I'm sorry, Jester. While my lord lies suffering, I will not take my ease."

"But Athon's not your lord. Not yet, anyway, you are only his betrothed. Do you love the king so much already?"

"Love has nothing to do with it, Crookleg. Our fathers arranged the match years ago. Athon was twelve, I was ten."

"Yes, I recall your first visit to the castle. You were fair even as a child."

Pira studied the dwarf in motley who rode before her, his arms and legs like child-sized, twisted parts, stuck badly onto a grown man's torso. "Were you there? I don't remember you at all, Festo."

"No? Ah, well, I was only a palace brat a year younger than Prince Athon then. I was not yet famous; not a fool yet, you see. Oops!" The jester's mount had momentarily balked. The little man leaned against the animal's neck to urge the beast into renewed motion. "Old John thinks it's time to eat, too," the fool announced.

"Our animals will eat as soon as we reach the tunnel."

"Faith, by then I'll be hungry enough to eat *them*, hide, harness, and shoes," Festo muttered. After a moment he added, "Lady, will you want me to lead you into Hell?"

"You will stay with the horse and ass."

Festo sighed. "Left behind with my brothers." He clucked comfortably to John. He and Pira rode for a while in the cool, fresh air of deep forest, the smell of black earth and green trees rich in their nostrils. At length, Festo once more broke the silence: "No one tells a fool anything. I saw the king's army return, flying the pennons of victory. I saw Athon, pale and grim, borne inside on a littler. Yet no one would say what wound he suffered."

Pira looked past the fool, into green distance. "If you must know, Athon was struck in the breast by an arrow of black ice. The leeches tell me no remedy in this world can halt his

slow death—and so I must seek balm from the next. The hermit spoke of an artifact of Hell, a wondrous gem called the Heart of Healing.”

“You visited the hermit on the Mount of Pines,” Festo said. “And the old man told you that years ago I was one of the hunting party that discovered this passageway. And since you are so much stronger than a poor crippled fool—”

“You gallantly consented to be my guide,” Pira finished for him. “The land rises. How far, now, to these hills?”

The leaf covering had become lighter, and here and there sunlight shafted slanting to the forest floor. Festo squinted at its angle. “If I do not drop from starvation, Lady, we should be at the tunnel somewhat after sunset.”

“So we shall be.”

And so they were. The tunnel opening was a tall, narrow crevice in the face of a limestone bluff, an opening so narrow that it left barely enough room for a full-grown warrior to squeeze through, though Pira, in her boy’s mail and helmet, and armed only with a short sword, could pass easily enough, as, for that matter, might Festo, had the dwarf wanted to enter. But if he did, he showed no sign. Bustling about with his waddling gait, he took care of the mounts while Pira braced one hand on the rough stone lip of the crevice and leaned to gaze into the deepening dark. She stood like that a long while. Finally, Festo’s call roused her.

Full night had come, and the sky was strewn with stars of late summer. The jester had started a campfire, and over it simmered a savory stew. “Come,” he urged. “Never go to Hell on an empty stomach.”

Drawing close to the fire, Pira accepted a mug of stew, cradled it in her hands, absorbing the warmth. “How far is it—through the tunnel?”

Festo poked at the fire with a long stick, sending sparks whirling up like rising stars, gone to join their sisters in the Hay-Wain or to become part of the Hunter’s bright belt. The fool looked up, his face unusually grim in the underlight of

the fire. "I did not journey that way, Lady. Of the dozen who did, only one returned."

Pira nodded. "The bishop."

"Bishop he was then. Your precious babbling mad hermit now." Festo hunched closer to the fire. "Who knows what lies inside the cavern, or how far it goes before leaving our world for the next?"

"A fool should know. I'm only a woman, yet I know well how far one can go in a tunnel."

Festo grinned, suddenly boyish. "There are two answers to that, Lady. The usual is this: 'How far can you go in a tunnel? Halfway; then you're coming out.' "

"What is the second answer?"

"My own: 'How far can you go in a tunnel? Depends on whom you're with.' "

Pira chuckled and set aside the untasted stew. "I like your 'whom,' Fool." She stared into the heart of the fire. She felt her shadow behind her, stretched long and thin, a black arrow pointing at the blacker slash of the tunnel mouth. After a few moments, she shook herself. "If I'm not here again in three days, return to Athon's castle and tell of the last of me. Be sure they burn Athon's body, with all due rites. None of this burial. Tell them only burning will set the king's soul free. And have them put something in Athon's death-song to tell folk of my failed attempt."

"You will wait for morning?"

"Why? No sun will rise underground."

Pira took water for four days and food enough, at starvation ration, for only three. She kindled a torch, strode to the cavern, entered, and paused only once, to look back at the dwarf's outline, grotesque against the glow of the campfire. Then she lifted the torch and moved into the deeper darkness.

The path beneath her sandals sloped downward. She held the torch in her left hand, stretched herself against the cool, rough wall of stone. At times the ceiling rock pressed almost

against her head, and she left behind a stinking, smoke-black trail where her torch fire licked it; again, the overhead rock soared away, with only echoes to tell her of the cathedral vaults above. Now she walked in near-silence, the grinding of sand beneath her feet and the pumped blood singing in her veins loud in her ears. Now came the *thip-thip-thip* of eternally dripping water, beating slow march time for her. Thrice she halted to draw a new torch from the supply strapped to her back; and each time, the newly kindled light flickered only on rock walls and the path, sloping always down, down, down.

So long she walked that at last she walked almost asleep. At first she mistook the red glow ahead for the ruddy reflection of her torch off a wet wall, but then air gusted in her face, dry, hot, and perfumed with brimstone. The glow took shape, became a sharp, high archway opening to—Pira stepped through. She stood in the open, under an empty black sky. No, not quite empty.

One star shone.

A solitary star, the color of blood, stood halfway up the sky on her right hand, a baleful crimson beacon more brilliant than any other star she had seen. Its ruddy light was nearly as bright as that of a full moon, and it illuminated a dreary country. Pira took more steps forward, raising her torch. The tunnel-arch opened amid a jumble of boulders, and behind her reared sheer rock cliffs. A doleful hissing filled the air. Pira let the torch drop, snuffed it against the ground, and waited to accustom her eyes to the vaster gloom. Now she saw to her left a great chasm in the rock, from which dimly glowing vapors steamed. The cleft cut a huge incurving sickle; near its point was a ridge of stone, on which stood a statue—or a human. Pira moved toward it.

“That is Lumiel, mortal!” boomed a stony voice behind her.

Pira spun, drew her sword, dropped to a crouch—and realized her puny weapon was useless. Close against the

cliffside reclined a naked giant, ten times man-sized, his bent left leg framing the tunnel mouth, his knee braced to support the top of the arch—she had stepped out under it. In the red glare of the star, she had an impression of massiveness, of weight beyond that of flesh: of living stone.

The giant's face was obscure in the gloom, but Pira felt eyes on her. The voice rumbled again: "I am Sha'bbat, Keeper of the Way." The figure stirred slightly, grating and grinding. "Rarely these days does a living mortal travel this path. You are in the Land Beneath the Crimson Star, O mortal."

"Demon Sha'bbat," Pira replied, tightening her grip on the sword hilt. "I come to seek the Heart of Healing. Where may I find it?"

"I know the bait whereof you speak, mortal. A ruby amulet, whose power is that it can, once in a generation of men, heal a mortal wound." The giant chuckled with a sound like pebbles rattling over a boulder. "Come, that is a puny thing to seek. There are so many others, woman, more . . . tempting. Pleasure outside your mate's bed, all delicious and undetected; a fountain of riches wherewith to indulge your whims; or there is revenge, a sweet intoxicant drunk from a steel chalice; or—"

"I seek the Heart of Healing."

The giant sighed, a desert wind fingering loose sand. "That only? That toy you may find at the Citadel of Satur—if you can travel so far. Our paths are treacherous to living feet."

"Tell me the way."

"I keep the Way; I don't tell it. Find it yourself, mortal. Or you might ask Lumiel. I, you see, do only my office: I keep the Way open. Lumiel, though, is more like you. She sometimes . . . concerns herself with mortal undertakings. Yes, ask the Taker of Tolls; ask Lumiel."

Warily, Pira looked behind her. Her eyes, used to the strange light, saw more clearly the standing figure atop the

hillock—the hillock she could now recognize as Sha’bbat’s bent right knee, resting on the ground. Pira took a great breath and sheathed her weapon before venturing toward Lumiel.

When she had come near enough to see the figure’s features, Pira stopped short, the air knotted in her chest. Lumiel was a naked woman, her skin a deep midnight blue. Armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows, she stood with her left foot slightly outthrust, her hips cocked as though she had held that position for eons. She wore an unearthly beauty and perfection of form, with breasts high and well shaped, waist narrow, hips full. Her hair gleamed silver in the light of the single star, and her face, filled though it was with loveliness mingled with grief, was monstrous. She had wept, this archer; over her cheeks the tears had spread and frozen, welding her eyelids shut, dripping in fanglike icicles on either side of her chin.

“Come, mortal,” she said in a voice like low string music.

“You—you are no demon.”

“Once, long ago, I was like you, a human woman. That which I now am, I am forever.”

“I—you heard me speak of my quest?”

“Yes. It is fruitless. Return now. Do not pass me, and you will not have to pay in the coin of our world.”

“But I come to save my betrothed from death.”

“Others have come on similar journeys. Few have returned. None have wholly succeeded.”

Pira fingered her sword hilt. “Still, I must try. What is the way, Lumiel?”

The standing figure inclined her head, a weary gesture. “You must traverse the Mire of Regret; cross the Dark River; and then keep to the path through the Forest of Possibility. At the end of the path, in a clearing, you will see the Scarlet Citadel. But it would be better if you never saw it.”

“How far, in what direction?”

“Do you see the Star?”

“Yes. It is at my right hand, midway up the sky.”

“That is our east. Your way lies north and west. You may reach the Citadel in the time it takes the Star to reach zenith, and return well before it sets, if you are firm of purpose. But beware! Do not let the Star set while you are still in our country.”

“Why?”

The fanged face turned in blind pity toward Pira. “I had reached just this spot—nearly free, nearly free!—when the Star sank on my own quest. When the light goes, so goes your freedom. Darkness took me here and made me what you see.”

Pira shuddered. Then, with another deep breath, she stepped past the archer. The crack in the ground that she had noticed scythed to within a pace of Sha’bbat’s knee, and she trod carefully the narrow passage between chasm and demon, her eyes streaming against the acrid fumes. Deep within the crevice, she saw a roiling floor of molten rock, glowing white-hot, belching and hissing. In a moment she had left it behind and viewed the countryside more clearly.

The hillside dipped down in an easy slope, losing itself finally in distance and darkness. The far horizon was merely a more solid blackness than the sky, suggestive of sharp-peaked barren mountains. In the middle distance were humped forms—trees, she supposed—and at their feet wound a black snake, reflecting the red light of the Star here and there. That must be the river she had to cross. Pira glanced once more at the Star to orient herself and began to descend the slope, heading north and west.

She walked through ankle-high grass and felt sudden stinging pain. Dismayed, she stepped back, against five or six hungry tugs. The grass waved, its blades yearning for her flesh. She saw the tiny sucker-mouths at the end of each blade, some of them wet with drops of blood. She drew her sword and slashed, and the blades of grass flew. Pira

sheathed the sword. The grass grew in tussocks, and she could, with care, thread her way around them. Intent on the path, Pira paused after a few yards, shivering. She had a strong feeling, for an instant, of being followed; but behind her the slope climbed empty toward the cliffs. The only eye visible was that of the Star, and that she defied. Avoiding the thirsty grass, Pira resumed her journey.

This underworld was not an utterly silent place, but its sounds seemed always on the edge of hearing: thin groans, as though from many yards under the ground, vibrated against the soles of her sandals; black flying things wheeled high, sending down long keening cries like the memory of an echo; and all around her, the whole land seemed to breathe ponderously.

The ground underfoot became springy, then marshy, and the hummocks of grass gave way to scattered knee-high shrubs, their branches sprouting from squat, thick stumps. Pira mistrusted these, too, and took care to move between them without touching, for it seemed to her that as she passed, the leaves stirred faintly in her direction, in no breeze. The wet path sucked at her feet, trying to tug off her sandals, and let her go on only reluctantly.

"Pira . . ."

She stopped, certain for a moment that she had only imagined the call. Or dreamed it—she was weary enough.

"Pira!"

A breathy but somehow familiar voice, coming from somewhere to her left. "Who calls me? Who is there?"

"Aleppa." A woman's voice, no doubt this time. "Aleppa the Sword. You knew me in life . . ."

Pira felt ice in her bones. "You're dead! They told me you fell in the king's last battle!"

"Slain, slain! Killed by a sorcerous lance in the midst of sins of wrath and hatred—and so I am punished, I find myself here. Help me, Pira!"

"Where are you?"

“Here. Down here.” The voice rang with a hollow timbre from low, near the ground. Parting the leaves of the bushes with her sword, Pira sought it out.

And stopped frozen when she found the source. Aleppa had never been fair. Her features were sharp as the weapon she took as nickname. All her days she had scorned the soft life of a courtesan for that of a warrior, and her skill with a blade had made her a trusted fighter in Athon’s own guard. But now the keen face looked up from the ground, for Aleppa was buried to the neck in soft muck. The Star glittered in twin reflections from her lifted eyes. She seemed at first to be bearded; then Pira realized that Aleppa’s chin had sprouted rootlets that sank to feed in the foulness of the marsh, and the woman’s blackened tongue lolled from her open mouth.

Then, looking more closely at the neighboring clumps, Pira could see that they, too, had once been human heads. Now branches sprouted from eyes, ears, and nostrils; and the tongues, plunging out from the mouths, had become swollen, forked roots: and still the plants stirred with half-sentient life.

“They spare no punishment here,” Aleppa said. “Do you yet live?”

“I do.”

“The battle? How went it after my death?”

“Athon’s arms were victorious.”

The warrior-woman barked out a laugh. “Then I’ve cheated you, Hell!” she cackled. “Now do your worst to me; I care not.” The eyes glittered at Pira again. “Water. From the river.” The eyes shifted, pointing. “That way. I thirst, Pira. Fetch me water—one drink only. When my tongue swells, when I am sealed deaf and blind forever, I will think on that one drink and bless you through all eternity.”

Pira offered her canteen. “One drink only, Aleppa.”

“No mortal water!” hissed the head. “That would be worse torment than you know, to taste again the water of our

world. Fetch me river water, Pira!”

“Very well.” Pira retreated to the path, marked the way in her mind, and pushed through to the verge of the river, a thick and sluggish tide, black in the light of the Star, now high up in the eastern sky. Pira removed her helmet and dipped it into the stream, then carefully bore the water back along the path.

“Aleppa?” she called as she neared the spot she remembered.

“Here, Pira, here! Bless you, child!”

Pira had turned from the path too far to the right. She pushed through brush, found Aleppa, and knelt, proffering the helmet. The head craned eagerly. “Closer, child. D’ye think I’ll bite?”

Pira leaned closer. With a sound of a tree root being wrenched from the earth, Aleppa’s arms tore free and grabbed for her, even as the horrid mouth gaped, the black tongue writhing—

And Pira was snatched backward, dropping the helmet. Aleppa howled, beat the mushy earth with frustrated fists, as Pira rolled free of the new attacker, bounded to her feet, drew her blade.

“I won’t hurt you,” said the man.

“Who are you?” Pira demanded.

The man frowned. He was young, perhaps Pira’s age, taller than she by half a head. He wore jerkin and trousers of soft brown leather, and the light of the Star showed him handsome in a way, with tousled brown curls and a face that held the transitory beauty of an adolescent on the very edge of manhood. But now the face reflected wariness. “What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean who are you? I seek no aid from demons!”

“I am no demon, Lady. I am a man, mortal as you.”

Aleppa hissed like a snake. Her arms scrabbled in the mud, flung aside the fallen helmet.

The young man stepped back. "Come away from her. She is mad with lust. No; let the helmet go. Give her no other chance."

Pira followed him back to the path. "What did she want?"

"Your life, I think. See here?" He lifted the leaves of a bush. At the foot—or the head—stretched a human skeleton, its neck now inextricable from the plant that had been a man's or woman's soul. The stranger let the leaves go and straightened as they swished back into place. "I think Aleppa—all these things—could hold onto their mortal form a little longer with a draft of blood."

Blood. The blood-red Star. Pira glanced at it. It was very near to zenith. "I have to go."

"I'll go with you."

"But I don't know you!"

"Are formal introductions necessary in Hell? Call me Walker, if you wish. I've walked far enough."

"I am Pira. I seek—"

"I know what you seek. I came the same way you did. Come, let us go. The Star is ever moving." Seeing her still hesitate, Walker added, "Lady, I will not take the treasure from you. It would do me no good. My quest is different from yours. Let us go."

"I am good with a sword," she warned.

The young man smiled. "I am good with no weapons at all," he said as they began to move.

The river crossing was dreadful. The black water would not hold them up to swim, and so they waded, in stench up to their necks, their feet dragging through slimy, pulped mulch, cold, ankle-deep, rotted. When they staggered onto the far bank, Pira almost wept with relief. It would be long before she would feel clean again. Her companion tugged her arm. "Let us go."

Ahead bulked the forest, low trees curiously bulbous, as though festooned with bladders. The Star, directly overhead now, cast utter shadow beneath the trees. As the travelers

neared, Pira saw that the trees bore a kind of fruit, dangling in grape-like clusters, each fruit the size of a man's head, green, translucent, and faintly aglow. "These are strange," Walker said.

"Follow the path," Pira said. "I was warned."

The trees closed on either side. The glowing fruits did nothing to light the way; rather, they merely indicated the nearness of the trees, and left a black slash that was the path. Walker reached out curiously and prodded one fruit. "It feels as if it's full of water," he said.

"Come on."

Pira was about to take out tinderbox and torch when the trees finally broke ahead, and once again she saw the countryside lit by the Star. "At last. I was beginning to think we'd never—Walker?"

He did not answer. "Walker? I don't have time to search for you," she warned.

What she said was true, but nonetheless, she kindled a light and started back along the path. She found him perhaps a hundred paces back, his eyes locked on one of the green globes, tears glistening on his face. "What's wrong?" she asked. Walker did not answer. Like a seer with her descrying crystal, he was rapt on something he could see in the green light. Alarmed, Pira seized his shoulder. He tried to shrug her aside. Angry, Pira struck at the hanging fruit with her torch. The globe burst, showered a feculent liquid, and sent forth a pungent, choking stench.

At last Walker moved. He blinked at Pira in the torchlight, his eyes still distant. "What is it?" he asked.

"What is it? You were in a trance! What did you see in that—that thing?"

The man slumped and groaned. "Do not ask, Lady!"

"Was it so horrible? Our future perhaps?"

He shook his head. "My present—as it might have been."

"I don't understand."

Walker shook himself. "Every man's life takes turns he wishes he could unturn. When he sees the difference between what he might have been and what he is—it is a cruel vision. I won't look again."

"Come," Pira said. "The forest ends just ahead."

They left the trees behind, and in the center of a broad, bowl-shaped vale, Pira saw her goal: The Scarlet Citadel of Satur.

The structure was like no castle she had seen. Half-round, like a ball buried in the earth, the main keep glowed with a ruby light of its own; and six surrounding towers, dome-topped, shone with a similar but dimmer light. The whole was smooth, showing no trace of window or door. They approached it silently.

"This is no stone I have ever seen," Walker said, running his hands over the curving surface. "It's more like metal, yet not as hard somehow."

Pira reached to feel the surface herself—and her hand slipped through, as if she had tried the texture of mist. She felt strong fingers close upon her wrist, opened her mouth to cry out, and was dragged through the wall.

The cry half-escaped. She found herself standing inside the Citadel, in a huge domed space, her wrist tight in the grip of a tall, smiling man. She blinked at him, then said, "Doesn't anyone in Hell wear clothes?"

Her captor threw back his head and laughed. He was tall, strong-featured, his skin the same ruby hue as the dome; and his body was pleasant to look upon. "You are delightful," he told her in a deep voice. "Most of your kind would scream or swoon. I'm glad to find you so spirited." He dropped her wrist.

Pira rubbed it and looked around. At the center of the huge room was a throne, and before it an altar-like table surmounted by a small jeweled chest. There were no other furnishings. "I seek—" she began.

"I know what you seek, mortal. I wonder if you shall get it."

"Where is my companion?"

"The man? See him if you wish."

The walls of the keep shimmered into transparency, and Pira saw Walker, pacing the outer boundary. "Here I am!" she called.

Once more the keep was solid and opaque. "He cannot see or hear you," the demon told Pira. "This Citadel, you see, is the product of my thought. I can make it solid—for some—or airy—for others—as I wish. It is a matter of concentration."

"The Heart of Healing," Pira said. "Is it here?"

"In the box, there," her captor said, with a negligent gesture toward the altar. "It is mine. I am Satur."

"I mean to take it with me," Pira said.

"If I refuse to give it to you?"

Pira drew her sword. Satur smiled at her. "Such fire! I have not been attacked by a mortal wielding a weapon in a thousand years." He spread his arms. "Try, woman."

Pira struck quickly, with a thrust that should have skewered him—but her blade passed through him as through air, meeting no resistance, making no mark. The demon laughed again. "It is hard, you see, to slay one of us on his own ground. However, we might discuss—a trade?"

Pira did not sheathe her sword. "What kind of trade?"

Satur's smile broadened, and he nodded. Something glimmered in the corner of her eye. She chanced a look. A bed had materialized, as plush as the couch of an Oriental king.

"No," she said.

"Then go, woman. You bore me. Observe, please, that I take nothing by force—but I yield nothing to those who refuse me."

Pira backed toward the throne. Before she had neared it, she found her way blocked by a smooth, invisible wall.

"You're doing this."

"Of course I am. What shall it be, woman? A bit of pleasant dalliance, and my full permission to open the chest and remove the Heart of Healing, or shall I merely throw you out? Choose."

"If I agreed, you would trick me."

"By the seven rivers of Hell, I swear that you will not be stopped by me from taking the Heart of Healing," Satur said. "None of us can break that oath."

With a furious cry, Pira hurled aside her sword. "Come, then!" She tore at her mail coat, loosened it, let it fall; kicked off her sandals; shrugged out of her soft chamois tunic and leggings, pushed off her loin-wrap; and stood naked. "Come, demon! Quickly!"

Satur was priapic already. At first like dry, hot mist, he came against her; then real, solid, he bore her back to the bed, his skin hot against hers, his muscled thigh parting her own legs. He clamped his hands tight on her buttocks. He burned, burned against her; and yet when he entered her, she felt he was made of ice. She cried between clenched teeth, rode with him, and despite herself felt the dizzy upswing of purely physical excitement. Satur had not breathed before, but now he was ever more real and gasped in passion, his breath hot and scented with ginger. He pushed her up, up, up, to the high peak, and she reeled over the edge at last.

"I think," he whispered against her throat as her heart thudded hard against her ribs, "I think I shall send you back with a special gift." He kissed each of her closed eyelids once. "Though some might call it a curse."

Then he was off her. She sat up, blinking. The walls of the Citadel had gone transparent again, and staring in at her, his arms spread as though he were crucified against the wall

"No!" she cried.

Satur grinned at her. "I thought he might at least have a look."

“Damn you.”

The demon’s smile broadened. “It’s much too late to damn me, woman. Oh, you think you can cover shame with a few garments? Yes, clothe yourself, that’s right.”

Eyes averted from the stricken gaze of Walker, Pira dressed. “Now, the Heart,” she snarled.

“Take it.”

She walked unobstructed to the altar, opened the jeweled lid of the chest. Inside, large as a man’s fist, glittered a faceted ruby that had to be her object. She reached to lift it

—

And her fingers passed through.

Pira spun in rage. Satur held up an admonishing finger. “/ am not stopping you.”

“Who is?”

“The jewel itself, I suppose. It’s not of my making, you know; not of this world at all. I made the chest, and its magic is obedient to me. But the jewel—it is from elsewhere. It has a very pure magic.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only a virgin can remove it from its chest,” Satur laughed.

With an inarticulate cry, Pira lifted the chest and hurled it. Satur tried to raise a warding hand—but the chest struck him low in the belly, and he crumpled, howling. The keep shivered around them.

“You can be hurt!” Pira cried. “Hurt by your own creations!” She cast about for another missile, felt the demon grab her, bit furiously at his claws—and found they were Walker’s hands.

“Come on!” the young man shouted. “Before the walls turn solid!”

Satur, his red face gone deep purple, groaned on the floor. Beyond him even the chest faded to near-invisibility. Walker dragged Pira across the room.

"Listen, demon!" she called back. "You wasted your effort! You hear? Our gardener was there long before you. And he—he was *better!*"

"Come *on!*" Walker hurled her through walls as thin as the film of a soap bubble.

They fell together. "I grow tired of your pushing me about, Walker," Pira growled.

"I'll try not to do it anymore." Behind them the Citadel had become as substantial as when they had first glimpsed it.

In a dead voice, Pira murmured, "You—saw?"

"And heard, partly."

She sighed. "Now I've killed the king."

"No." Walker reached inside his jerkin. "Here." He held the Heart.

"You—" Pira stammered. "But only a virgin could—you're a —" she looked at him, and knowledge came into her eyes.

"You're Festo."

"Am I myself again?"

"You still look—as you did in the marsh. But I see your self now, in your eyes. What happened? How were you transformed?"

The young man got painfully to his feet. "If you mean, how do I come to be different in your sight, I don't know. The light of the Star, perhaps. To myself, I seem as I have been since childhood, since the day a playmate gave me a little push. We were exploring a parapet, you see—forbidden play. I fell right off when he shoved. I broke my fall, first, with my legs, by hitting a roof. I broke my legs, too. And the roof. From there I tumbled into the courtyard, where I tried to amuse the crowd with a falling handstand. That proved a second mistake. Shattered legs, shattered arms—I was only twelve then. My limbs healed badly and never kept pace with the rest of me after that." His smile was bitter. "Of course I'm a virgin. What woman could love a twisted fool?"

"I would kiss you, if you would not feel defiled."

“Not I, my lady.” He looked to the sky. “But our time is very short. Here.” He placed the jewel in her hand, and this time she felt its cold heaviness.

“I can touch it now.”

“I think the spell worked only inside that place. Satur—he doesn’t care now, you see. That, I think is the worst of Hell. If you felt the whole land hated you, bent itself in malice to your destruction, you could bear up. But this malignant indifference—that is the worst torment of Hell.”

They left the Citadel behind. The Star had slipped far down the western sky. It was more than halfway to its rest when they cleared the forest; had moved a handbreadth closer to the horizon as they forded the river; and rested almost on the jagged western rim as they toiled up the hill to the tunnel. But when Lumiel once again was in sight, they had minutes to spare. “We’ll make it,” Pira said, daring finally to hope.

“Halt, travelers,” came Lumiel’s voice as they came within a few paces of her. “Now you must pay the Toll.” She knocked an arrow. “The coin is mortal blood. Who shall pay?”

They were within sight of the cavern. Pira looked at the standing archer. “Lumiel,” she said softly, with great sorrow. “You would not do this. You are as I am.”

“I was once. Now I am a guardian of Hell. Speak, and let the survivor move quickly, for I feel the Star sinking.”

Pira turned to Festo. “Here, take the Heart,” she said in a level voice. “Though I do not know how to loose its magic—”

“It’s simple enough,” the stony voice of Sha’bbat said. “Place the gem on the chest of the sufferer. It will return home when its healing spell has worked itself.

Pira gave no sign of having heard. “Take it to the king,” she told Festo. Turning, she called, “Now, Lumiel!”

“So be it.” The arm pulled smoothly back, tautening the bowstring. An arrow sang, and Pira felt the jolt, fell to her knees, cried out. But she had been struck from behind. Festo slumped over her, an arrow in his chest.

"Oh, Fool," Lumiel said quietly, and Pira somehow knew that more tears were freezing.

Pira touched Festo's cheek. He opened his eyes, full of pain. "I pushed you again, Lady." His fingers fumbled. "Take back the Heart."

"I might—I could use it to—"

"No. Take it to the king. Even healed, I should still be Festo."

Behind them, Sha'bbat began to laugh. "I will not," Pira said under her breath, "I will not let them have your soul."

"There is no way—"

"There is one way. The chasm. Fire purifies."

Pira lifted him. Festo had only his own weight, hardly more than a boy's. Beside the chasm she kissed him once; and then she let him fall. Demon Sha'bbat roared again, this time in anger, as a blossom of fire welled up. A hot wind whipped Pira's hair, urging her toward the tunnel; and in the wind she thought she heard the fool's soft voice: "Now! Go now!"

The Star glimmered and guttered. Pira dashed for the opening, saw Sha'bbat's huge leg moving, dived under it—

There was not even an echo. She lay in utter darkness, utter soundlessness, without sword, without helmet, but with a treasure clutched to her chest. She stretched there exhausted, thought of the stricken king, and dragged herself up toward the light of her own world.

Pira frightened the peasants on the ride back, for she carried about her a fell look. At the palace the physicians refused to let her see Athon, but took the heart from her and bade her wait in her own chamber. She paced the floor nervously, waiting for word. When at last she heard a step up the stair, she turned to question the messenger—and instead found herself facing Athon himself, blond, hale, and strong.

"My love," murmured the bearded king, taking a step toward her.

Pira shrank back. "You—you are well, my Lord?"

Athon smiled, his teeth white and even. "By miracle. Thanks to you."

"And to Festo."

Athon's blue eyes narrowed. "Yes, of course, the fool as well. What happened to him?"

"You did."

"What?"

"You—you pushed him. When you were children. You pushed him, and he fell from the parapet."

Athon's face reddened. "He told you, did he? Damn him! But I rewarded him well enough, I made amends, I gave him a position—"

"You made him a fool."

Athon shrugged. "And is that such a hard life, to be a fool? No battles to fight, no peasants to rule, no quarreling barons to reconcile. Festo should have thanked me. Now come, love. Victory sits on my banners, all the land is at peace, and at last we may celebrate our wedding."

Pira walked to the casement. The summer land lay gold and green in the long light of afternoon. "First," she said, "I think I'd better tell you exactly how I came to possess the Heart of Healing."

"If you wish."

She told him. Everything.

She turned when she had finished, and Athon would not meet her eyes. "I hardly know what to say, Pira. This changes things."

"Does it?"

Athon essays a hollow chuckle. "Well, yes. A queen, Pira, after all—a queen can't have had, you know, a . . . demon lover."

"I didn't know that rule."

"My position—the trust of my people—"

"Yes, I understand."

“But Pira, a woman, though she be not the queen—a woman who has the, ah, favor of the king—I mean, though I may not make you my queen, you could yet be dear to me, you could be a—”

“A sort of female fool? No, thank you, Athon. I think we had better leave it at that.” Pira closed her eyes, then opened them again. “I will demand payment, though, for your cure.”

Suspicion straightened Athon’s back. “Payment?”

“Come, it’s less than any leech would ask. Give me my choice of a suit of armor and of a sword from your armory; let me take my pick of the steeds in your stables; and set me free to wander where I will. That is all.”

Athon could not hide the relief that flooded his face. “It is little enough. Granted, Pira.”

Pira’s smile was wry. “Thank you, my lor—Your Majesty.”

After that, Pira rode for many years, and many were the tales told of her, some stranger than others. One was that she traveled with the shade of a gallant young man who sometimes sang ghostly songs to her in the twilit forest. Another tale often repeated was that she had gained somewhere the gift of double sight, and that when she looked at a person, she saw not the body only, but the soul also. Sometimes the one fitted the other as a hand a glove; but as often, a weak, unprepossessing body would house the spirit of a hero; and again, a stalwart man had within him a shriveled, ugly, brutish little soul.

This gift, it is said, warned her away from the bed of King Athon, he of ignoble and detested memory and—blessedly—short reign.

The Cure

Caren Gussoff

Like any proper lady, Olive well knew the sensation of fainting. Usually, she welcomed the swoon, as befit her station. But tonight, Olive knew if she succumbed she wouldn't awaken again. There were stories of women who went into treatment and never returned. But they weren't women like her. They were wanton, wild women. Uncontrollable and savage.

Olive tried to scream; she fought for air. But the weight on her chest drove the breath from her lungs and terror into her heart.

She kicked and clawed, but the abominable treatments this asylum had forced upon her these many weeks weakened her—and even in the best of circumstances, she required a hand up; her middle was soft, the muscles ductile and limp from years of tight-laced corsets.

Olive managed a few long, ugly gasps. Blood beat in her ears and she had the funny sensation that her thoughts were being spoken aloud by someone else. *You are going to die here. This is hell.*

She had tried to love her husband or to crave a family. But she could not. The fact that she did not consider that sick was part of why Caleb finally acquiesced to all the urgings and placed her under the care of Doctor Cole.

Doctor Cole tried all manner of cures, but she still did not feel love for her husband or any sense of the maternal. She was incurable.

Tonight, her vision failed from the edges inward. Olive told herself before her breath stilled that death was a kind of cure.

Yet Olive woke up alive.

A nurse manipulated her roughly, disentangling Olive from her twisted bed sheets and clothes. The nurse's hands were dry and cracked, and scraped on the linens.

A ring of pain throbbed across Olive's brow. She yawned so widely, she thought her face would crack and she would black out from the discomfort.

"Madam didn't sleep well?" the nurse asked.

"How could I?" Olive's throat felt sore from gasping for air and coughing.

The nurse ignored the comment, and propped her up with pillows. "It's time for Madam to breakfast."

Olive shook her head. "Just water."

"Madam needs nourishment for healing," the nurse said.

"Healing?" Olive's tone grew vicious, but she did not despair of it. "Like the sort of healing I endured last night?" Olive coughed again, the strain of too many words.

Her lungs would fight the air for a while; she had felt similarly after her wedding. After nine hours in her staunchest corset—grain-cut silk, steel stays, a solid whalebone busk—she would pant throughout the night even after it was unlaced, which prevented Caleb from immediately consummating the marriage. They had to wait until her delicate lungs and middle had recovered into regular binding before he mounted her.

She could wait for eternity before consummating anything else with that man. He'd left her here to be killed.

"Madam?"

Olive frowned at the nurse. "The attempt on my life," she rasped.

"The attempt . . . ?" the nurse began. But then she smiled: the smile one gives to the very old or the very small, the

insane or the infirm. “Madam is in a fit. She must calm herself.”

“She will not calm herself.” Olive wanted to slap the nurse. “I escaped death by a fraction.” But even had she strength to strike out, there would be no pleasure in it, and might only force another attempt on her life. Olive closed her eyes, resigned.

When she opened them again, the nurse was holding her clothing and stretching that idiotic smile into a grin.

“Madam will dress. After breakfast, she is to meet with the doctor and her husband in the dayroom.”

Olive allowed the nurse to dress her, though her awful hands rasped against the fine weave of Olive’s shift. The nurse brushed out Olive’s hair, and once she was presentable enough, signaled for breakfast to be wheeled in.

Though she’d initially refused breakfast, Olive ravenously downed the whole serving of beef tea and the raisin porridge. The nurse practically beamed at Olive’s empty dishes, but Olive had no time to react before the attendant materialized to lift her into her wheeled chair.

Olive had never seen this attendant—not that she paid mind to attendants in general. But this one placed himself directly within her line of vision.

He was young, but she couldn’t tell how young. His face did not catch the eye, but once he was in front of Olive, she couldn’t turn away. There was something terrifying about his features, but a pleasant terrifying, an exhilarating terrifying, like going down a steep hill in a waxed toboggan. And he smiled at her—not the condescending smile of the nurse or the disingenuous one of the doctor—but a smile of two people who share a secret, or who are about to.

His grip on her was both practiced and peculiar. As he lowered her into the chair, she leaned into his neck and smelled him. His odor was surprisingly mature and pleasant on such a young man—like browned butter, leather, and salt.

It was distracting. She came to her senses as she was parked in the dayroom.

Caleb was already there. Olive looked at her husband with the judgment of a stranger.

He wore a high shirt collar of fine white linen and a peach silk cravat, but both, along with his tapered trousers, were limp and unkempt and hung on his thin frame. He resembled a flower in need of watering.

The blacking on his square-toed shoes was not fully buffed in, and even across the room Olive could see he'd missed shaving whole regions of his face. And then she felt them, like the nurse's hands, catch on the fabric of her gown when he kneeled to embrace her.

He smelled of old milk, like a baby, from a spill on his shirt. Sour, but innocent.

And this assured her of several things. Firstly, she still did not feel any love for him. Secondly, Caleb was not answerable for the abuse she'd suffered in the night. And lastly, her husband was no more likely to save her than a great bird would swoop in and carry her away. The most effectual thing he'd ever accomplished was abandoning her here.

Doctor Cole thankfully interrupted them. "Welcome, Mr. Read," he said with an extended hand.

Caleb stood up, embarrassed like he'd been caught with a fist full of cake. Caleb returned his hand, and Doctor Cole pumped it vigorously. Olive could feel milk-perfumed wind stir by her face.

"And Mrs. Read." Doctor Cole spoke over her shoulder. He smiled; not the pitying one of the nurse, however. His was false and fixed, permanently present. "I was told you had quite a nightmare, but that you ate your breakfast, heartily and with relish." He then turned back to Caleb. "Proper nourishment is a fundamental pillar of successful treatment. Your wife tends to, against my advisement, pick at her

morning meals, much like a little nervous bird. But today, she finished her plate."

At that, Caleb beamed at Olive as if she had invented the wheel.

Olive focused on the doctor. "It was not a nightmare, sir. I was nearly strangled."

She saw Caleb's expression change from the corner of an eye, but the doctor held his smile. "Quite impossible," he said. "It was your imagination."

"It was verily not my imagination," Olive shot back, but the breath required to speak sharply choked her again, and she coughed and panted.

"Come," Doctor Cole said. "Let us go into my office for some privacy."

Doctor Cole led the way, Caleb behind him. Olive had very nearly forgotten the attendant until her chair began to move after them. She tried to remember his face, and found she could only imagine bits, parts: well-formed lips; bright, strange eyes—greenish, perhaps—the warmth of his hands and neck and shoulders.

Olive considered being ashamed, but she could not.

In the office, Doctor Cole settled behind his mahogany desk. "We should have some tea," he said to the attendant. "And close the door behind you."

He motioned for Caleb to sit in the winged chair beside Olive, and then he tented his fingers and considered his words—his smile, of course, never deviating from his lips. And when he spoke, he addressed Caleb only.

"It was the great doctor Galen who said '*Passio hysteria unum nomen ist, varia tamamnet et innumera,*' " Doctor Cole said. "Hysteria is the disease, and many are its symptoms. Your wife's, I'm afraid, now encompass hallucinations."

"What can be done?" Caleb asked.

As if Olive were not in the room, possessing ears and the capacity for language, the doctor spoke only to her

husband: "My recommendation is not a happy one."

And her idiot husband bobbed his head. He had no idea what the doctor said.

Doctor Cole continued. "I believe surgery is the next step."

The door opened, and the attendant carried in a wooden tray laid with fine porcelain cups. He handed out the cups, his hand, Olive believed, lingering at hers, before retreating back against the wall until he was needed again.

Olive felt a tingle where he had touched her, but she hid it by studying the cup. The oolong tea's perfume covered the attendant's musk. The design painted on the cups was fine, intricate violets and entwined greenery.

"Do you take cream?" Doctor Cole asked.

Caleb nodded; of course he took cream in his tea. And sugar. More of both than the actual brew.

Olive did not take cream, nor sugar. But without asking, Caleb snatched her cup and switched it with his, already dressed like candy. She started to protest, but the snatched cup was already cloudy and stirred with the sugar spoon.

Doctor Cole sipped his tea—plain, as tea should be—then said, "We should remove the offending organ."

The steam rose prettily from the beautiful cup. Decorations that delicate required tiny hands to paint them, probably a woman's. Like her own.

But the vapors were more cloying than toilet water. Olive wrinkled her nose and breathed through her mouth.

"You mean take out her—" Caleb started.

But she could smell it. Taste it.

Doctor Cole nodded. "Indeed. As soon as possible."

She could no longer take it. Any of it. Olive threw the cup and its contents at the doctor. Her aim and strength were poor, but the precious cup shattered across the reddish desktop.

She tried to yell, but it was all she could do to force out, "You filthy hoaxter." She puffed and wheezed. "Damn you to

hell.”

Doctor Cole slammed the desk as if she had yelled. “Mrs. Read, calm yourself. This is unacceptable.” He still smiled, but his eyes revealed fury. “This,” he said to Caleb, “is what I have spoken of. She shows little improvement. The issue is functional.”

Her husband was quiet at that. Olive considered her level of desperation. It was high. “Caleb,” she said. Her voice sounded more pitiful than sharp; the idea was to coax him as one would coax a child when one has exhausted all other disciplinary resources. Olive dropped her chin so she could look up at him; he always loved when she did that, he’d told her on many occasions. “I am being abused. If you have love for me, take me from here. Do not let them do this. I shan’t survive here.”

Before her words could take root, Doctor Cole rose from his chair. “Sir,” he said to Caleb. “Manipulation is but another symptom of her ailment. As painful as it may seem, she shan’t survive with demons clouding her judgment.”

Her husband sagged as much as nodded. Olive’s eye filled with tears, but of rage, not sadness. She pounded the armrests of her chair until Doctor Cole called for the attendant to hold her arms still.

“And take her to her room. Request the duty nurse to prepare some laudanum,” Doctor Cole said.

The attendant seized her arms, but without force; it was more as if they had carefully choreographed a dance. When he placed them in her lap, she let him. Then he maneuvered the chair out of the doctor’s office, through the dayroom and down the hall. Before he took her into her room, however, he stopped the chair and came around to face her, a booted foot securing the wheel.

“There is nothing wrong with you, dear lady. Nothing that cannot be easily fixed.”

“Then fix me,” she said. She knew what it sounded like. And she was beyond caring. She’d become that sort of

woman. She'd been driven to it.

"Are you a devil?" she asked.

"Not if the good doctor is the damned one." Then he returned to behind her chair, pushed it through the doorway and drew her to the bedside. He lifted and placed her perfectly in the center of the mattress, and then leaned down, as if he would kiss her.

Olive was shocked to find that she wanted him to kiss her. Quite desperately, in fact.

"Do you wish me to return?" he asked her.

She felt his breath on her face. She nodded, a wild, wanton woman. Uncontrollable and savage.

He hovered there for a moment. Then he left.

Before Olive could compose herself, the afternoon nurse entered, carrying a small medical tray. "Madam," the nurse said. "I have the doctor's order to administer you some medication. It's a nice medicine, madam. The dosing isn't always so nice, but it's a nice one."

With that, she rolled Olive onto her side with smoother hands than the morning nurse. Olive felt her shift being arranged, and then cold liquid flushed into her hindquarters.

It was only a moment. The smooth-handed nurse grabbed Olive's shoulder and rolled her again onto her back. "It's a bit of a startle, yes?"

Once the nurse left, Olive wept until she lost desire to weep. She felt sleepy and contented. She was pinned again to the bed, but by her own arms and legs, and it did not alarm her. At some point, she thought she smelled Caleb, but when she opened her eyes, the rough-skinned nurse was forcing sips of milky sugared tea down her throat.

She woke up in the darkness. Another weight dropped onto her bed, but this time beside her. She squinted at it. It was blacker than the darkness, and she could only make out the silhouette. Was it man shaped? She reached out to it, and something warm—a hand?—clasped hers. The perfume

was familiar. The attendant. He'd returned as he promised. She reached out again, but felt nothing. He was gone.

"Please don't leave me," she said. "Please stay."

So he did.

The nearest surgeon was a week's journey away. Doctor Cole continued the laudanum regimen—though it confounded the nursing staff that in the mornings, when Olive should be low and begging for her next dose, she hardly seemed to need it at all.

She was serene and calm, and nearly even friendly. However, her fair skin was turning pallid and moist, and she grew thinner at an alarming rate. Her spine stood in relief through her stomach, as if she was lying on a snake.

Doctor Cole took her measurements, and even his constant insincere smile wavered.

She wasted away, in both senses, during the day. Her husband came to weep at her bedside a few times and she held his head, supporting his neck, without pleasure or annoyance, though the smell of milk and sugar would then hang in the air like a ghost long after he left, and would only dissipate after she voided the contents of her belly.

Hours passed and she examined the embroidery of the coverlet, or watched the sunbeam move across her room and disappear.

When the sunbeam disappeared, that meant it was night.

And at night, the attendant came to her. He sat beside her, and ran his hands through her hair. Then he lay beside her, and ran his hands down her body.

Then he climbed on top of her. The first time, though he was tender, moderate in movement, and as still as he could, Olive understood that he had been the weight dropped upon her, choking her from dreams. He was a beast who had well studied the habits and peculiarities of the living, but innocent to their practice. And he hadn't meant to hurt or frighten her but rather he sat upon her that night because

he had chosen her for the most intimate of examinations. Not a hunter with prey though, if that is how he thought of their encounters, she was willing quarry.

Once, when she was in finishing school, she'd distracted herself riding a nubbed tree branch. She'd thought she'd damaged herself once the paroxysm subsided, and thenceforth she avoided that tree from fear and embarrassment.

But these nights, under the sure hand of her lover, Olive felt that damage again and again. It took her less and less time between to catch her breaths, though he couldn't control how quickly he drained her essence.

He, though a devil, worried over her. He would find another from which to feed, he whispered to her. Much more time with him would kill her. Then he would kiss her forehead before he left in a gesture of farewell.

But Olive begged him to return to her, and he was compelled by her asking.

On the seventh day, Olive's body was down to its bones and organs. The nurses ascribed her bright eyes to a fever, though Olive knew it was that she was finally clear sighted.

At her bedside, Doctor Cole debated the procedure with the surgeon. *She is too weak*, said one. *But this may save her life*, said the other. The sobs, she smelled the ones that came from her husband in sour caramel. The nurses, in and out of focus, smiled down at her with the smile one gives the dying.

Olive closed her eyes for the last time. He'd set her free. She was already cured.

Doctor Oliver Reed's title was largely ceremonial, but his patients did not mind. It was no lie that he had trained under the right hand of a master.

Any suspicions prompted by his recent appearance in the field, his lack of an office or the late hour of his house calls, were superseded by his startling results.

By the height of Doctor Reed's career, nerve-vibration and excitation through medical massage as treatment for functional hysteria were already lauded as the only reliable and proper course—taken from, as Doctor Reed explained to his patients—the original writings of the great physician Galen.

Numerous were its symptoms, but the cure was simple.

"Call me Oliver," the doctor told his new patient. She was a hale woman of thirty-two, and he figured she could handle three visits with him before he drained more vitality than could be countered by treatment.

She smiled at him finally. "May I get you some tea first?"

"Yes, please," Doctor Reed told her. "No milk."

"No," she agreed. "I prefer it straight." She leaned over to whisper. "My husband insists I take it with milk and sugar. As he does."

She was ready. "Perhaps we can take tea afterward," the doctor said.

Her hair was auburn in the candlelight, with a soft sheen he knew came from painstaking care and disciplined brushing. It was loosely bound with a ribbon, which he gently untied and laid at the bedside. "This won't hurt a bit," he said as he combed the bit of silk free with his fingers. He took his time.

Unveiled

J. Daniel Stone

A painfully skinny androgyne at the drab third-floor window of her drab third-floor apartment, tobacco-stained tongue running across lips striped black. The record she plays is on repeat, the couch that is taking over her body is scrungy and the Manic Panic hair dye reeks like poison. Dreaming . . . thinking . . . demon . . . monster. *I'm a monster*. But then the curtain (Salvation Army special) flapped, unveiling the cryptic lyrics she'd scrawled in scarlet across the pane: *Believability—Menocide—Unveiled*.

She would evoke none of the goddesses of ash and salvation. What came had no marks of cultural inferiority, no decay to speak of. Rather, it had many names and many faces juxtaposed and disengaged; a *supranatural* force that lived within maddening melodies of her music.

"You grieve long and hard," the incubus, the goblin, the fiend said.

She brought a bottle of wine to her lips, leaving a black smear across the tip.

"I know when one hides their feelings. You hide yours quite overtly."

"No kidding," sharp little face hidden beneath still-wet dreads smearing black.

This girl was a master of the rictus grin, the kind a corpse makes. Like a corpse there was no possible way that he could read her thoughts for she'd already blocked him out of her head: the little wisp was a gifted child. She seemed pleasantly surprised when he said her name, even though it

was already stapled to the walls on cheap neon poster prints and inscribed in gold like spilled beer across all of the records that she'd recorded with her band. Delilah Dellinger, such a devilish name to compliment a silhouette clad in black on black on black.

"Are you in mourning?"

"Nope."

"I think you are. You've lost your one true love. I can feel it."

"Ghost drawl."

Her tattoos bulged furiously through the tight lace that covered her arms—bats, a squiggling road map, musical scales. Her demeanor did not match her mystical outer grace. She almost had a Stevie Nicks flair about her, that is until one realizes that Delilah is generally cold and oppressive, the natural characteristics that hide vulnerability. Too smart for her own good and far too mentally bruised for her twenty-three years, Delilah often spoke about her frustration with the dead, death itself and her pure rejection of it. She flat out refused to die, refused to stand fucking still. Her lyrics were flawed by words like "ghost hunting" and "Shadow Man" and "astral projection": the haunted part of her life she wanted to erase. Hunting ghosts had been Clive's thing, and Delilah flat-out ruined that relationship. But what she never said out loud was how bad she felt about it. Delilah did not know how to grieve privately; public grief was a performance.

"Would you ever consider loving a man? A demon? A monster?"

"Clive's dead and talking to the worms. I don't think much about love."

"Independent movement?"

"Rational thinking."

There is a Bible of rules that states a proper incubus must covet his charge while possessed by the swirling paralysis of REM sleep, or drunk on a week's worth of rotgut whiskey. But

Delilah hardly slept. Bruise-dark bags suffused beneath eyes the color of blue fire; a constant bitterness flowered within her like it would any insomniac. But as complex as the human body has evolved to survive, it also needs to repair the damage brought on by stress, rage, depression, and intoxicating substances. Sleep is the only cure for all that is deemed terrible while awake. Without rest, one can die.

He loomed above her. "When you sleep it's like your body is suspended between pain and regret before you wake up screaming, only shutting up as the bottle hits your lips."

"Congratulations. Want a lollipop?"

"You're running from your dreams."

Through self-medication and music therapy, Delilah was able to half function, at least enough to make band practice and write new songs. Though women are considered the weakest link in the game of gender equality, the incubus knew that they were twice as strong. They bear children, are the pillar of every family and their emotions can render them extremely feral beneath the veil of complete control.

"You still dream of Clive."

Delilah slipped a crazy colored CD into the stereo. "That's if he can catch me."

"He's what I'd call your personal poltergeist. Dead . . . but not dead enough."

"I already told you to stay out of my fucking dreams!"

"Your anger fascinates me. If I could only touch you . . . I imagine you'd incinerate me."

"Such a passive-aggressive poet you are. Why do you care?"

"I admire you."

"I'm a fucking plague. The Rage Plague." She bit at her dark lacquered fingernails.

"Your Rez loves you. And Alex too."

This was Delilah's second year in New York City and the memories of the Pennsylvania boondocks were about as fresh as the day-old fish sold in Chinatown. A once-

smalltown girl succumbed to the city's fervor and spent nights sulking in damnation and days with insouciant nightmares brought a bottle of cheap red wine. Music was her guide. She soon befriended the city's local denizens, her apartment often sheltering drug deals and squatters, scrawny metal heads snorting whatever they could crush for a good time, and Brooklyn hipsters using their parents' cash to score a taste of the real New York narcotic scene. Delilah never liked the hipsters; they claimed to know what hard work was, what living on the edge really felt like, so long as they had the cushion of their parents' trust-fund account. But once Delilah's fist met their teeth, they never spoke like that again.

Two men lived in the apartment as well. Delilah called the frayed-looking one Rez and the girlish-looking one Alex. Rez was her twin brother and Alex was her best friend. All three of them were twined into the same disposition of angst, dread, and depression that tends to plague the few fringe scenes left in this city. Alex and Rez were partners, which often meant Delilah was left alone while they did what young boys do. It wasn't that she didn't want to tag along; she just hated to be the wraith-like presence between a pair of boys who were so sickeningly in love. The gossip within the fringe scene claimed that she was asexual.

"Shut the fuck up about them." Her kohl-smeared eyes glossed with tears.

"Don't you know that I love you?" His voice a crescendo of need.

She'd heard those words in a past life.

"Sounds like something I heard before."

"Maybe it's something I've already said to you."

"I don't recall ever having a conversation with a ghost."

"Let me take away the pain," he begged.

"You'll never get in my head, never know the truth. I refuse to wilt to your advances."

Delilah chugged from the wine bottle. On the ceiling dog-eared posters hung like butcher meat; the Heavy Metal superheroes she admired stared frozen with gawked mouths and fuck-me eyes, spreading comfort across Delilah's sharp face. Admiration was the most lenient term for her love of music. She could find herself as any one of those oily forms in black leather, but for the ocean of indifference between them. Delilah was an amalgamation of passion, terror, and rage, finest ingredients that a self-proclaimed songwriter could never dream of.

"Sometimes you just gotta smile, pretend and forget," Delilah said, slipping a butterfly blade out of her pocket. It fluttered alive in her hand.

"Doesn't it hurt to cut that way?"

"You mean you can't feel pain?"

"I don't remember much about life."

So alive when I'm with you. She closed her eyes. "Physical pain belittles the emotional."

Delilah wore that infamous grin again as the knife created a tiny squiggling worm of blood across her wrist. It reminded her of how they first met: in the dark naturally, the moonlight soft as fur, the incense smoke trailing like a will-o'-the-wisp and the candlelight suffusing warmth in the hollows of her face. Delilah had just cut herself behind the knee, right through her black jeans as her body gyrated to a sinister song and her mind swayed between the temptations of passing out or insomnia. A warm autumn wind brought in the smell of piling garbage, spray paint, and spicy marijuana smoke. The tune playing in the background was "Flesh of Eve," song two off the debut EP from her band Electric Orchid. Delilah's voice had crawled out of the speakers like a séance, an original masterpiece poisoned with sorcery and malice. Her lyrics cut deep as her own knife, but it wasn't until she scrawled a screaming line of poetry on the window pane that he came out of hiding.

I'll never speak of that moment so long as I live. She rocked back and forth, staring at the scramble of words on the window. There he caught his own reflection clouded by hers: faint ectoplasmic smear soft as spider web, much like Delilah's soul. He'd already read her diaries, her forbidden book of lyrics. She'd written about Clive a thousand heartbreaking times, how she'd shown him her murky dream world, how she took it all away.

Her famous angry scowl. "Shall I repeat myself again?"

"As drunk as you are, you're still the most eloquent girl I know."

All of a sudden Delilah was arguing with herself back and forth, an uncontrollable tide: the temptation of suicide but her pure fear of the act, the wounds from the butterfly blade on her wrists and calves forming a new set of scar tissue.

Life does not have to be lived like some broken record.

I can be my own person.

"If you just let me unveil what's inside you: your deepest desires, your true longings, we could—"

"We?" She began to laugh. "There will never be a *we*."

"Cold as always, Delilah. Scared little girl refusing to explore her wants to save face."

Delilah bolted to her feet as if on the go and grabbed her pack of smokes. "I have a show tonight."

Too hot for October, humidity like August and the sudden smell of rain, the reality of it iridescent on the blacktop. Delilah bolted with the Vector microphone clutched to her chest, a snarling clump of girl-flesh as he tailed her through the streets of Alphabet City. Easy to track: just follow the trail of clove cigarettes and the forever turmoil of a pissed-off girl that lingers in the heavy air.

Most of the blocks were alive with the usual bustle; the rest were dead as doornails. Not such a scary place anymore as it was scarily safe. The graffiti was sparse and the storefront windows were finally beginning to lose their runny

coat of grease vapors. One did not catch the sore sight of a bum pissing in a random alleyway, or a strung-out junkie willing to rob you dry so long as he can get his fix. But the tenements that weren't filled with transplant posers paying holier-than-thou rents still spoke of bad times, of poor families three generations in, of the city's bureaucratic capability of keeping certain people of certain color and status on this side of the jaded street and everyone else safe on the other side.

The window to the bar was clouded with a massive number of grayscale posters that read *Electric Orchid Tonight!* Delilah noticed that someone had burned her band's insignia into the wood door; that's how serious her fans were. Past the entrance and she barely showed her I.D. to the doorman who was pleased to let her in without fault. Like many girls, Delilah denied her feral features; the grace of her high cheekbones, tiny chin, and straight teeth without the help of braces made her all the more beautiful. But all that beauty didn't change the fact that she was the lead singer of tonight's headlining band, and so everyone knew her by face if not by name, knew her age too.

Inside was dark as some fucked-up X-ray; a world without color, the absence of light. Pipes lined the ceiling like varicose veins and the punky floorboards rattled beneath her Grinders. The deafening PA system vomited nu-metal and British punk, way too up-to-date a system given the ramshackle culture. Delilah eyed the poor excuse for a stage in the back and then took a panoramic view: random metalheads clad in dirty clothes called out to her and the usual grunge-punk-industrial posers sat in cliques sipping bright green cocktails that made their lips shimmer.

Same fringe kids, but a good turnout.

With twenty dollars in her pocket and happy hour slipping into its last moments of cheap drinks and half-smiling faces, she planned to order her cold black heart out. Drinking before a show soothed her because alcoholism did not exist

in her vocabulary. The bartender would not take her money. *For you everything is on the house!* Bad juju to charge the headlining band's lead singer even with the bar three people thick. Delilah accepted, and the Dog Fish Head 90 Minute IPA was like carbonated floral heaven as it invaded her tongue, double hopped and laid over the golden thickness of barley. She licked the wet remnants of the filmy head from the glass in such an erotic fashion that three hipsters turned their heads, interested, but soon had to look away when they caught a good glimpse of the snarling skinny girl with crazy hair.

"I think they liked you."

Delilah swung her Vector microphone toward the sound and clocked a depressed-looking girl in the face. She screamed, dropped her beer, and covered her mouth with a little pale hand that instantly slimed the color of blood mixed with dark lipstick. No one made any sudden movements because most kids knew about Delilah's temper, and the fact that Delilah just stood there vexed rather than apologizing surprised nobody. *Damn voice*, Delilah thought. It pissed her off that he could follow her wherever she went. Weren't most ghosts supposed to be bound to the place where they died? Many laws of the underworld were certainly broken.

Stubborn in her own way, Delilah would finish her drink, play her show and then leave like nothing was between them. But before that she would indulge in some good old-fashioned sweet leaf. Beneath the guise of gaudy hookah one could order a fat stash of sour diesel and smoke it scot-free in here for a night of relaxing and talking smack. It was a smart way to bring some of the culture of Amsterdam to a small dive in Manhattan. Delilah's hookah was gold plated and ornate as an Arabian king's throne; she took three huge pulls before she felt the flowers bloom in her skull, before she felt as if she was living in a new skin to become so chatty.

"Aren't you supposed to be stuck in the last place that saw you alive?" she asked.

"Not when such gifted beings as you can talk to us."

Delilah chugged her beer.

"You're killing yourself to live, Delilah. What a waste."

"*I see Clive . . .* in my dreams, okay? I can't get him out of my goddamn head! I wish I knew how, but I don't." Delilah pulled on her hair and her eyes widened. A few kids embraced one another as if she was going to explode.

"I can get him out. I'm a jealous—"

"You're a fucking haunt, not God—"

"Let me *inside* you."

Inside you.

"No!"

"Then do as you always do: drink yourself into a stupor and dream like there's no end to regret."

"Stay out of my damn head. Rez warned me."

"Your brother's sensitive. But he has it all wrong, love."

Hair whipping out of control, small scarred hand rubbing her temple. "Liar."

"Seeing Clive in your dreams makes him your incubus. Not me."

The door slammed and Delilah's band came straggling through in a cloud of cigarette ash—three bony blots of darkness—with instruments on their backs, bringing with them the stench of Jägermeister and warm summer nights. Billy, Jimmy, and Sheigh barely exchanged a glance with Delilah before they set up in the equipment in back of the dive.

"You'd think she would've helped us bring the shit in from the trunk," Delilah heard Jimmy say as he unloaded the custom Warlock strapped to his back.

"She's in one of her quiet moods again . . . nothing personal," Sheigh said.

"Or maybe she's become a real diva now that we've had some minor success."

Blah. Blah. Blah. All talk. Delilah just wanted to play, wanted to tear into the world so deep with her music that she'd be able to smell the dark force that keeps the universe in balance. And then finally she saw Alex stroll in, beautiful as always in his genderless fashion, multicolored hair tied into a pony tail and that same huge trench coat hanging heavy on his fragile bones. Rez was not far behind him, chatting with a couple of friends about the advance reading copy of some beat poet's novel he was obsessed with.

"Alex," Delilah screamed.

"Hey, D. You ready?"

"I don't know if I can do this tonight."

"Still having those dreams?" Alex wrapped his skinny arm around her shoulders.

Delilah's head craned to lean on Alex's collarbone.

"Clive's usual begging."

"He's still looking to get laid? He hasn't changed, even in death."

"You're the only one who knows that he's haunting me."

"Remember what I told you: as long as you ignore him, he can't get to you. He can always look, but can never touch," Alex said.

"What if I made that mistake already . . . what if I made a certain contact?"

"Then we're taking too many steps back into the past. I thought those days were dead." Alex kissed Delilah's flushed cheek. "Oh, gods, you're wearing way too much powder."

All of a sudden quiet, doomsday lingering, and the shadows in the bar began to ravage Alex's face. On the way to the stage Delilah watched the bobbling drunken heads of the crowd lose themselves in talk, cheap beer, and a universal love for music. They smelled of dirty clothes, stale cigarettes, and teenage dreams. Delilah felt those same butterflies like when she'd first played in New York, that night still so fresh in her mind: downtown club full of wasted youth, wasted talent, and wasted needs. Would she still wow

them? Would she still be the reigning queen of the underground music scene as all of those downtown and Brooklyn publications labeled her?

Only one way to find out.

Time to fly.

Smoke machine out of control and the lights a stroboscopic rage. Sheigh's distorted bass shook the stage madly; Billy's drumstick kissed a cymbal three times before Alex's synthesizer rang out like something derived from Black Sabbath's *Sabotage* album. Delilah closed her eyes and allowed music to be in control; her lips brushed the edge of the Vector microphone and her fingers spread across it in a powerful grip. Jimmy charged steadfast, his feet slamming at his damaged guitar pedals for crazy effects, and unleashed a beastly parade of chords and pinch harmonics like screaming birds. And so Delilah opened her mouth, let her voice flood the room like a silver river.

*Green slate sky dark as pain
Manifest the decadence
I call the goddess to reign*

It was risky to open their set with a new song, and it had taken hours of Delilah's begging to convince the band to do such. *The fans like our shows to be a certain way.* Delilah understood their concerns: you have to start a set with a hit in order to reel the crowd in, to make them feel like they want to stay. But Delilah liked to take chances. The song was entitled "Ambigrams & Palindromes," inspired straight from the pages of Rez's speculative short fiction. Jimmy had written the key-note change, chorus, and bridge within an hour after he'd read Delilah's lyrics, the bottle of Jäger only half empty and already blazing in their stomachs: a writing milestone. Sheigh threw her bass line over it fluid as mercury, as did Alex and Billy with their respective

instruments. But it was Delilah's melodies which remained the most controversial.

*The night is in control
Under the guise of demons
Her mind will open into a black hole*

Voice of purgatory, of the stairway to hell, and soon the crowd dispersed. Did they not like the new music? Did they not understand that an artist must evolve, must keep moving forward in order to not make a joke of herself? Delilah closed her eyes and continued her rough vocal line, but when she opened them again she saw dozens of tall, lanky kids with disheveled hair and ghost hunting cameras swaying in their hands. Had she fallen asleep?

Only one way to find out.

Delilah began her molt, ripping free from the skin of reality, and stepped off the stage. Behind her, the other Delilah was still singing as her dream body sailed through the sea of faceless bodies and entered the astral plane. Honeycombed descent, labyrinthine, and the sky was the color of pumpkin teeth; the moon rolled cold and snapped fierce as lightning. This place might as well have been the underworld of Kur, the loathsome lair of Lilitu and Alû. Maybe the goddesses of redemption and plague would finally come, her muses, her salvation.

Slate-colored road pale against her black boots, and Delilah knew that no direction was safe; in this world, every road is the one of needles. Delilah lifted her arms to show her insidious tattoos, the razor scars a beacon to all the lingering suicide ghosts. She kept singing because her music attracted the dead, because in this world each word was a weapon, each sound another building block to answers most sought after. There was no way around it: if she was going to stop the dreams, if she was going to

become whole again, she'd have to make contact. *Fuck what Alex said. Enough was enough.*

"You still sing beautifully, love."

Clive had startled Delilah; she actually flinched, and hated the fact that she did. He stood tall as she remembered him, a long time since she'd seen his face, a long time since she'd fucked everything up. The grimy ghost-hunting device was held by hands covered in thief's gloves; the Misfits t-shirt hung loose on his torso and the usual beanie covered his ratty English hair.

"What the hell do you want?" she asked.

"You have to ask after all these weeks? To finish what we started, love. You know you feel guilty about what you did to us."

Weeks? Delilah saw the shape-shifting presence behind Clive, his own wasted shadow. It was thin, wretched.

"All that pathetic poetry. Just like when you were alive," she said.

Clive's lips pursed but his eyes remained tired. Was he still hunting ghosts in death? Could a ghost hunt another?

"You've given me a new life in dream. I'm so alone. All I want is you, *mon fleur vénéneux*."

"I'm not your fucking concubine."

Clive laughed. "In this place the rules are not your own. My dreams are yours, and yours are mine. I can feel your anger in here, your guilt. You liked what we had. But as with everything else . . . you ruined it."

"I just don't want it."

Clive shook his head. "An empty, indecisive answer as always."

"You're no Freddy Krueger; you're not a living nightmare. You're just my fading memory."

"Don't you miss me, Delilah? I miss you, your music, and the sound of your voice; I miss its power, how it brought us to here. Don't you remember bringing us here?"

She didn't answer Clive right away, couldn't answer him. The memory of their night in the alleyway by the Cabal art gallery came streaming before her eyes like a skipping record. Oh, the way Clive manipulated her mind and her flesh, the way his strong hands stroked her hair, her breasts, and oh, how his words coerced her legs to open and her panties to slip off! It was so easy to give in, to let hormones pave over critical thinking: she wanted him so bad. She wanted to feel loved, protected, desired.

"I remember how you looked at me," Clive said with a shallow smile. "I remember how you let me touch you."

The Jäger was still fresh on their tongues and the cloves had been smoked past the filter; all of a sudden they were kissing, long and deep, tongues and teeth, mouth-flesh and the walls of her vagina began to throb in time with her confused heart. Animalistic, and the rain warm as the sweat between them but tasteless as the hollow fuck session in a sleazy city alleyway filled with rats the size of cats. Her body burned with desire, and she was about to explode before she realized that what they were doing was wrong. The light that night just wasn't right; the way Clive grew obsessive was too much to handle. He was going to love her forever, be by her side forever—until she put a stop to it.

The cornfed complacency of man and woman ruling the world will not infect me.

She wouldn't fall for Clive, and the only way she knew to escape was through song. So she began a vociferous melody, let the very cells of her stop dividing so her soul could slide free from her body like umbilical residue. She grabbed hold of Clive tight as they entered the dream world she had been visiting since she was a little girl.

"If you would've let us be together . . ." His English accent began to unravel to a drawl. Unveiled, he said, "I'd not have to sneak into your life, into your dreams under the guise of a mythological imbecile."

“We don’t belong together. You were bad for me then and you’re bad for me now.”

Hangover pain like someone had dropped a brick on her head, and Delilah was brought back into the night Clive almost raped her. They were trapped in a burning building in Long Island City cleaving to life by the magic of aerosol art and the control of old ghosts. Clive had already beaten Rez to a bloody pulp for disagreeing with Clive’s love for Delilah; he’d manhandled Delilah to the point of nearly passing out. The anger over Delilah’s refusal to love him helped Clive call upon an anger that convinced him that if he could not have Delilah in life, then he’d have her in death.

The knife gouge in her side was pulsing darkly and the blood was molten over her stomach and chest. Her legs were open and her skirt was ripped; her body was so weak she could barely fight him off. It wasn’t until his hands had slid up her thigh, teasing the warm heat of her, that Delilah knew she was so vulnerable that Clive could do whatever he wanted, that no one would care, no one would help. He would pluck his sweet flower and then crush her in the end.

“I thought an incubus was a rather good disguise. Creature of seduction and insatiability. Now *that* would work for me. Not you,” Delilah said with her hands molding into fists. “After all you did? After the scars you left me, after the dignity you nearly stole?”

“Fuck you. Just fuck you. It was your teasing—”

“It’s over! You can’t hurt me; you’re a powerless, bitter ghost unable to move away from the life you cursed yourself into.”

Clive stepped closer, his limbs elongating, his hair lengthening and his shadow shrinking. His face was mangled by rage and jealousy, and it was the last thing Delilah saw before their bodies clashed, skin to ectoplasm, bones snapping and blood spilling thickly as the ghost of her past invaded without permission. Her head throbbed and one of her legs fell limp in pain, but she was on the offensive

fast, and Delilah's nails ripped furrows into Clive's face. Their mingled blood had the consistency of jelly and smelled of a sewer.

Old death.

"You killed me." His voice only a hectic whisper. "You broke my heart . . . "

Delilah felt her insides wrench. As much as she'd have loved to take Clive on in a street brawl, Delilah knew that there was no point. That story had already been told. That story would involve keeping his memory alive when all she wanted was for him to be truly dead. And so she called upon the only thing that had ever saved her when she needed it the most: music. Her voice belted like an anti-melody to this dream world. Everything writhed uncomfortably as the image of Electric Orchid on stage came closer and closer as Delilah rode her musical ascension towards reality. She watched in pity as Clive was unable to follow; it seemed he was locked within his own shadow, never truly able to see past the dark times, much like a shadow is always dark.

And so he disappeared as if she'd never even known him.

Because her words were about rejection, of Delilah no longer needing old ghosts and never letting her feelings get the best of her, Electric Orchid played an extended set. There can be no explanation as to how music can cure a bad feeling, a virus of guilt, or a plaguing past. It just needs to be accepted. It was as enigmatic as magic itself. Delilah finished the last song with a throat-tearing scream and the sea of faces was left astonished, mind-fucked, their mouths hanging open like atrophy.

The Wedding Guest

Steve Chapman

He looked young, beach handsome with the blond hair and cheekbones. Not remotely her type. But each time Kristen stole a glance at him, he was staring back.

She sat alone at the table, her assigned seatmates off dancing and boozing, congratulating the happy couple. Robby was outside with a clutch of cronies, cigars, and shop talk. Dinner was done, the cake cut. Now there were only the endless hours between the end of the formal festivities and the forced evacuation of the ballroom, her least favorite part of any wedding.

The dire band played on, no end in sight.

Kristen had set a deadline of this evening—Mandy's wedding, the family together, watching and judging—to decide. She could have a baby, counting on it to save her marriage. Or she could have an affair, certain its revelation would manage what she could not—the marriage's end.

She nursed the gin and tonic, her fourth, and decided she favored the baby. She imagined him raven-haired like his mother, the salve she and Robby needed to repair themselves, to fix whatever mysterious ailment had ruined them.

All she needed to do was get pregnant.

The blond young man stared, making no attempt to hide his interest. Kristen looked away—directly at her mother, glaring daggers back at her. She lowered her gaze to the table. Maybe he was about to come over, to take one of the

empty seats beside her. That would give her mother and sisters something to talk about.

Kristen grabbed her drink and left the ballroom, wandering into the winding halls of the old hotel. Through oval windows she could see the dunes, strobes of lightning etching the dark ocean beyond.

When she had first felt the vertiginous despair in Robby's presence, when she found herself more disappointed when he made it home than when he didn't, she'd done what she always had—asked her mother. But where in the past Dorothy had offered rueful slices of hard-won wisdom in response to Kristen's troubles, this time the intelligence drained from her eyes.

Kristen hadn't asked again. She understood. There were some decisions that could not be second-guessed or taken back, at least not in her family's world.

She had tried to fix her marriage, yet she was no closer to understanding what ailed it than she'd been a year ago. Twenty-nine years old, she felt middle-aged. Surrounded by her family, she could talk to no one.

She came to a long, dim room of scarlet and gold, gilded mirrors on the ceiling. The lamps were ensconced in glorious Beaux Arts shades of stained crystal, throwing rippling shadows from the blood-red carpet to the intricate detail of the tin ceiling.

"Another refugee from the 'music'?" An older man sat alone at the elaborate bar. He might have been forty, fifty. Brown-haired and dark-eyed, he wore a light-colored suit and neatly trimmed beard. "Join me?"

The thought of speaking to someone outside her family, a complete stranger, was intoxicating. She felt a pleasing tingle at the base of her spine. "I'm Kristen."

"Bellefleur. What are you drinking?"

She giggled at his name. She was dimly aware she'd already had too much to drink, but there was no one here to reprimand her. She told him and he waved for the bartender.

"I didn't love the wedding," she said, appalled at her nerve.

"A disappointment," Bellefleur agreed. "One approaches these events hopefully. But they're often the marriage to come in microcosm. Youth and adoration curdled in the course of a single evening."

"They looked happy." Kristen sipped too quickly from the fresh glass. It was delicious. "But you know they won't be."

Bellefleur smiled, not unkindly. "The inescapable question is why a woman as young and beautiful as you should appear so unhappy."

"I—thank you." Kristen felt herself blush. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me." He laid a hand on top of hers.

She pulled away. "I'm married."

"You don't love Robby."

"You know my husband?" Kristen felt a sharp shock of fear at his name. She didn't know this man. The drink tasted metallic, harsh on her tongue.

The planes of his face, pleasant from a distance, shifted into configurations of menace. He leaned in, too close. "The spark between you, if there ever was one, is long curdled. You're afraid to confide in anyone. A child might help, but you can't wait that long."

"Who are you?" Kristen grabbed her bag. She needed to get out of here.

"A devil," Bellefleur swirled his drink, coils of scarlet twisting within the martini glass, "Of some small and rising prominence. We have business, you and I."

She barked out a laugh. "What, you're tempting me? I would never betray my husband." But she realized that if she didn't get away from this man, she would. She felt an intangible attraction to him, overwhelming her judgment.

"I work for the Father of Lies, Kristen. I know one when I hear it."

"Leaving now." She slid off the stool. "Don't follow me."

Kristen marched back the way she'd come, past the oval windows. There was a right turn, then a left, and she should be back at the ballroom. With Robby and her mother and the blond boy and everyone else she'd escaped just minutes before.

Bellefleur stood in her path, scarlet martini glass in hand. "Running from me is much like fleeing yourself, pointless and vaguely embarrassing."

It was impossible that he could be in front of her, impossible that he knew about her dream baby. Was he really the devil? She'd only had four damn drinks.

Kristen lunged for an emergency exit. She scrambled down a handful of steps, onto the beach. The icy March wind streamed through her hair and dress. Sand sucked at her heels.

Behind her the devil descended the stairs, following, taking his time.

She kicked off her shoes and clambered over the first of the dunes, her heart pounding, cold sand shifting beneath her feet. She lost her balance and fell down the other side. She lay on the beach, her dress torn, staring up at rushing storm clouds and the ghosts of her breath.

"Can you run?" The blond youth from the wedding stood over her, offering his hand. "There isn't much time."

She was so cold she could have broken anything on the way down without feeling it. But she took his hand.

He led her across the dark beach to the water's edge, black waves smashing themselves into silver foam. They turned north and jogged for almost a mile before he signaled her to stop.

Kristen looked back, unable to parse the darkness. "I'm dreaming all this, right?"

"Sorry, no." The boy was absurdly good looking. His eyes glowed a brilliant cyan blue, bright even on this moonless night. Close up he appeared younger than she'd thought.

His beauty made her angry. "You were staring at me, before. It's not polite."

"I'm not polite. I'm an angel." He graced her with a slight, ironic bow. "Anapostos."

"Oh come on."

"You believe he's a devil." The youth exuded a quiet, rational calm. And he knew that the older man claimed to be a devil.

Kristen felt her brittle grip on the world shattering. "I believe he knows more about me than seems possible and I'm terrified of him. And that your name is possibly sillier than his."

"I won't let him take your soul."

It silenced her for a moment. She drew in a deep breath. "That's what he wants?"

"He's tempting you. If you give in your soul becomes his."

Kristen felt a chill beyond the wind. She had always believed in the devil. It was easier than believing in God. But she never imagined she'd meet him. "Why me?"

He looked away, embarrassed for her.

She realized that she knew why. "Because I've been weak."

"It draws him. I can protect you."

"All I have to do is say no?" Kristen said this like it was no big deal, as if she could. As if she hadn't spent the past three months stepping into temptation's path entirely without the devil's assistance.

"He's remarkably persuasive. But I carry grace on my wings, even here on earth. As long as I stay near you I can block his vision."

"You don't have wings." She tried to imagine bringing this honeyed angel home to Robby. "And you can't be with me all the time."

"The devil has plenty of souls to harvest. He plucks the low-hanging fruit. If you prove too difficult he'll move on. Stay with me, hidden till morning, and then you'll be safe."

"A fine plan." Bellefleur strode across the sand, his bright suit muted by the darkness. "But predicated on my not finding you, say, now."

Anapostos stepped in front of Kristen, but the devil's stare seemed to pass clean through him.

"Don't look at him." The youth's voice diminished even as he spoke, lost in the furious wind.

"Kristen." Bellefleur brushed him aside. "I'm here to give you what you want."

Kristen realized she did want him, not for herself or the moment, but for the certainty. This was the longing she'd been wrestling with for weeks. She wished for the certainty of sin, an end to her absurd flirtations and embarrassing retreats.

This weakness had called the devil down on her. She hadn't intended to be a bad wife, but how else could her marriage have proven such a disaster? Even to fall must be better than this endless, exhausting *trying*.

The devil took her hand. His touch, hot as a coal, warmed her everywhere. She fell into his arms, the fire of his body enveloping her.

It was only the feel of him against her cheek that allowed her to escape. When Robby had first affected his beard, just after the honeymoon, she'd put her foot down. She could not stand beards.

She twisted out of the devil's arms and into the icy water. The wind-whipped waves embraced her, their implacable cold blasting away all the feeling that had never made her anything but uncomfortable.

Kristen woke as he laid her on the bed. She was surrounded by warm, white light. At first she thought herself dead, heaven won by her final sacrifice.

"You're still shivering." The angel wrapped a white towel around her.

She was soaked. Her teeth chattered. She looked past him.

"My hotel. It was closer." He was wet as well, but warm to the touch.

"You pulled me out?"

"Take off your dress."

"You saved my life."

"Not if you don't get these wet things off."

She couldn't feel her shaking fingers. "Zipper. In the back."

Anapostos had stripped off his sopping shirt. Thick scars, ugly and fresh, cut across both shoulder blades.

"Your wings?"

"The price paid for my coming." He gently slid her dress around her shoulders, off her hips. "I don't regret it."

"I don't understand why you saved me. If I drowned, still faithful—he couldn't take my soul. Isn't that why you were sent here?"

"I wasn't sent here." Anapostos looked away. "Angels observe, but we're forbidden to interfere in the lives of mortals. Every day I peer into the hearts of hundreds of men and women. I feel what they feel. But I've been doing this for hundreds of years. I can feel for mortals, but their pains and longings no longer touch me."

Anapostos turned back to face her, blue eyes blazing. "Until you, Kristen. Your despairing heart. Your beautiful prayers. You brought me back to life. When I saw the devil coming for you, I had to act."

"But I'm horrible. I've ruined my marriage. I don't know what I want and can't control what I do."

"Kristen, you are a good person. And you are *so* special."

She leaned forward and kissed him. He hesitated only a moment before responding in kind. Then his hands were everywhere.

Kristen opened her eyes to sunlight. The storm had moved off and golden light filled the white room. Her head ached.

The angel lay beneath the sheets, still asleep. Kristen ran her fingertips along his flank, pleased anew by his shape, even as the night returned to her in full.

She sat up straight. She was historically a poor drunk, but never like this. She had freaked out on a wedding guest and run out into the storm. She had slept with a pretty college boy with an inspired line of patter who had possibly—probably: she glanced at her dress, soaked and stained, on the floor—fished her out of the surf.

Her marriage was over. She was ruined. Certainty was finally hers. Kristen thought she might sob, but found herself giggling.

She had imagined this moment forever, the dreaded morning after. Waking beside a stranger and realizing she had betrayed her vows, her husband, everything good in the world. She had conjured this shame in excruciating, luxurious detail.

Now, faced with the actuality, she felt none of this. She felt different, but it was a difference completely unlike her melodramatic imaginings. She felt a little sad, and a little older.

The youth's hip collapsed beneath her touch. The sheet covering him deflated. He was gone, his outline fading from the mattress.

Bellefleur sat by the window, watching her.

The terror of the dark beach came crashing into the bright room. Kristen drew the empty sheet tight about her shoulders. The devil and the angel: it was true. The devil she had believed in all her life had come for her soul, and the God she believed in when convenient was lost to her forever.

"What did you do to him?" Her voice shook.

"You take cream and sugar, I believe?" Bellefleur held a still-steaming Starbucks Grande.

But it wasn't *all* true. Kristen realized she knew exactly what had happened to her angel. "He wasn't real. He was your creature. Like a moron I fell for him."

"How could you not? Anapostos' swoon-worthy particulars were entirely predicated on your yearnings." The devil set the coffee on the dresser. "Trust me, you would have found the real thing less alluring and rather more judgmental."

"This is how you tempt people?"

"When it suits."

Of course it was a trick. She had believed an angel would sacrifice his wings for an adulteress? That he would find her *good*? "It seems awfully elaborate. I mean, I was going to screw up like this no matter what you did. You'd have gotten my soul. Or is this just how you get your kicks?"

"No." The devil rose from his chair. "These masques are not the elements of my vocation that bring gratification."

"What happens now? You pull me screaming me down to hell? Do you wait until I die or kill me with a power tool or something?" Kristen wanted to run, but that was how she had come to this sorry bed. As much as she regretted what she'd done, the devil had given her the clarity she wanted. She didn't love Robby. He probably didn't love her. This was the mysterious problem with her marriage.

She had married him because she hadn't known what else to do when he asked her, on his knees, in front of all the people at the beautiful restaurant. Because she couldn't imagine what she would tell everyone if she refused her boyfriend of three years. And because once she had made this instant, catastrophic decision, she had refused with every fiber of her being to examine it.

She was the furthest thing from special—just one of many millions unwilling to take responsibility for their lives. That it had taken awakening in a stranger's bed to realize it didn't reflect well upon her, but it had saved her the tragedy of subjecting a child to whatever her marriage would have become.

"What do you imagine you've done, Kristen?" the devil asked. "Your angel was nothing but a dream. Surely even your people don't rate an evening of robust self-stimulation a shooting offense?"

"What are you saying? I'm not fallen?"

"I'm sure I'm uniquely unqualified to judge."

She studied the devil. The contours of his face appeared gentler, melancholy. "You're not here to take my soul."

"A convenient if somewhat insulting folklore of which I make occasional use."

"Then what was all this for? This . . . masque?"

"My people are bringers of knowledge. We attempt to assist those mortals capable of it." Bellefleur's lidless stare read the essence of her like a book fallen open at the most crucial page. "Some knowledge cannot be told. It must be experienced."

The self-knowledge Kristen had sought and fled, from the final moments of her own wedding three years past.

She stood, facing down the devil. "Thanks a bunch for the knowledge. I don't love my husband. Fine. But I'm not going to just up and leave him. I made a commitment. I *married* him. That means something where I come from." She flushed red. Her throat was dry, her voice ragged.

Bellefleur passed her the coffee. It was warm in her hands.

"So don't go thinking I'm going to divorce Robby this afternoon, break my vows, or have some tawdry affair, just because of your stupid knowledge. Whatever else this is it's my fault, and I'm gonna try to make it right before I just give up." Kristen was furious, but not with the devil.

"The serpent brings knowledge, nothing more." Bellefleur rose. "Well, perhaps the occasional coffee. What you do with it is entirely your own affair." He picked his hat off the dresser and opened the door.

"That's it?" Kristen wanted to sound angry but her fury was abating, giving way to an unfamiliar contemplation. "Am I supposed to thank you or tip you or something?"

“Traditionally, you’re supposed to hate and fear me.” The devil nodded farewell, a silhouette in the bright morning light. “But the choice is yours.”

Kristen took a sip of coffee, harsh and soothing at once. That, she supposed, was what she had been so afraid of.

A Shot of Fireball

Carrie Laben

Since moving to Montana, Sandy had slept with a classmate who insisted he didn't do one-night stands and therefore hooked up with her twice before confessing that he really had a crush on Beth from the poetry program. She'd met a guy on OkCupid who talked a good game about keeping things casual until he abruptly broke it off because he couldn't see a future with anyone who wouldn't go to church with him. She had a month of once-a-week dates with a Forest Service guy who'd wound up getting transferred to Idaho to monitor the wolverine population out there. That was it. In two years.

She was sitting in the Silver Dollar two hours before close on a Monday night when the thin man walked in. She'd been shooting the shit with Jake and Fluffy all night, and they had, come to think of it, bemoaned the man shortage a bit. Jake was another poet, a guy built like a fire hydrant who wrote about his childhood on the high plains and collected out-of-luck dogs. It was even harder for him to find a guy than it was for Sandy. Fluffy was straight, six foot five, a bearded Viking pool shark/barista whose angle on the problem was that he was deeply, deeply sick of getting hit on at work.

Fluffy spotted the newcomer, gestured him over. He slid onto the stool across the table from Sandy and grinned; he had strangely white and even teeth, set in a foxlike face only partly disguised by his sideburns. At some point, his wire-

framed glasses had been broken across the nose and fixed with a coil of wire.

"I'm going to win the Shake-a-Day," he said, poured himself a Pabst from their pitcher, and turned back to the bar. Fluffy followed him.

Sandy raised an eyebrow at Jake.

"Caleb," he said. "The big guy says he plays a mean game of pool."

Fluffy whooped, a noise like a battle cry.

"Throws a mean die too, it sounds like."

"I know 'die' is right, but it sounds weird."

"So does 'throws a mean dice.' "

"Throws a mean Yahtzee?"

"It'll do."

Then Fluffy was back, bearing four shots, and Caleb was behind him, stuffing his wallet back into the pocket of his jeans. To Sandy, it looked like the jeans might be a bit too tight to accommodate a wallet newly thick with five hundred bucks in twenties, but it worked somehow. Maybe his jeans were bigger on the inside. Now that would be nice.

"Fireball," Caleb said, but Sandy had already caught the medicinal cinnamon whiff. Everyone in town seemed to be enamored of the stuff, and it was the official shot of celebration and any situation that called for a hearty "fuck yeah!" The Silver Dollar even had a special cooler full of it, because obviously something called Fireball should be served chilled. For herself, Sandy hated it. It gave her heartburn.

Still, she could put up with it so's not to be a killjoy, especially when it came to a cute stranger. Down the hatch.

"What do you do, friend?"

"I tell lies for a living," she said, and grinned back. Of course the living wasn't in the lies, it was in the teaching stipend, but that didn't sound as good. "A lot of my stories are online. You should Google them."

They finished the pitcher, and another pitcher, and another—Caleb was splashy with his winnings and insisted on switching to Fat Tire, which almost made up for the Fireball. Though Sandy could never recall the conversation afterwards as precisely as she would have liked, they wound up talking about Robert Anton Wilson somehow. Caleb declared himself the number-one fan of *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*. Then he asked her to dance.

“There’s no band,” she said.

“Something good will come on the radio in a minute.” He paused and tilted his ear up, and sure enough, the next track was “Tumbling Dice.” “There you go.”

Sandy stood up and let Caleb take her hand. He actually knew how to three-step; she had to watch his feet. Sure, she’d had a lot to drink, but his boots seemed to be different sizes.

“Motorcycle accident,” he said when he caught her staring. “Lost all the toes off the left one.”

“You don’t limp.”

“It’s been a long time.”

When the song was over he squeezed her hand for an extra beat before he returned to the table. Jake was rolling a cigarette, and the two went outside to smoke.

“Well, it looks like your drought is over,” Fluffy said, pouring the last of the pitcher into Sandy’s glass.

“I don’t know. Seems cocky. Can I trust him?”

“Oh, he can be a little bit of an asshole but he’s basically good shit.”

The bar had nearly emptied out, and Janie, the bartender, was giving them that look that meant she wanted stragglers gone so she could close up early. Sandy was almost ready to give in to that look—in the long run, keeping a bartender happy was more important than getting laid—when Caleb finally came back in, alone.

“Where’s Jake?”

“Someone left a chow dog tied up to the bike rack. It freaked out when it saw me and he’s been trying to calm it down so he can get it untangled ever since.”

“Weird.”

“Dogs don’t like me. I guess I smell strange to them or something.”

“It’s eye contact,” Fluffy said. “They hate that thing you do where you try to stare them down.”

Caleb shrugged, turned towards the door.

“Wait,” Sandy said. “We’ll go out the back way. Fluffy, you tell Jake we’re leaving.”

Fluffy nodded, and flashed her a thumbs-up when Caleb turned toward the back door.

Outside, a light drizzle had started to fall. Caleb had produced another cigarette while she wasn’t looking, and she moved upwind of him. He slipped his free arm around her waist. He was warm, and she decided to go with it.

“Do you want to go back to my place?” Caleb asked. “We can just cuddle if you want.”

“Where do you live?”

“Over on Front Street.”

It wouldn’t be too hard to get home from there, she decided.

“Holy crap,” she said, as they walked down his driveway, just as the rain was getting worse. “We’re neighbors. I live right over there.”

Sure enough, her apartment was visible across the back yard from his. She’d left the porch light on. Worse came to worst, the fence was low and not too sharp. This was better than she’d expected, honestly.

And the more she looked at him, the hotter he got. His hair was red-blond to complement his fox face, redder now that it was damp, and just shaggy enough. As he opened the door and flicked on the light, she stared at his back and decided that aside from the asymmetrical boots his figure was pretty great—she liked them on the thin side, but he

wasn't scrawny, and true he didn't have much of an ass but men didn't these days. That wasn't really a handicap.

Just cuddle indeed.

As she stepped inside, the biggest cat she'd ever seen rose from a battered armchair and came to meet them, thumping audibly as he jumped to the floor. He was orange, and just looking she assumed he was mostly fluff, but when she reached down to pet him she discovered herself stroking a solid, muscular creature almost the size of a bobcat.

"Hey, Monster," Caleb said, and the cat began rubbing ecstatically around his shins.

"I think I might have figured out why dogs don't like the smell of you," Sandy said, stripping off her damp coat and slinging it over the doorknob.

"Want another beer?" The fridge was in the near-right corner, the bed to the far left, and in between, aside from Monster's chair and a card table with a folding chair on either side, everything was boxes.

"Moving out?" *Here we go again.*

"Nope, moving in. I just got finished with a job in Atlanta and I wanted a complete change of pace. Fluffy's the first guy I met in town. About that beer . . ."

"Nah," she said, and stepped to the left. "I'll take those cuddles you mentioned, though."

She woke up with the sensation she could hardly breathe, thrashed, and knocked Monster off her back as she turned over.

"Sorry," Caleb mumbled, sitting up. "He likes to cuddle too."

The wool blanket fell away from his chest, and in the morning light she was pleased to see that the beer goggles hadn't lied too baldly. He was an odd combination of thin but cut that she'd seen only a few times before, on a couple of the farm boys from around Ames in her youth, and on a man she'd met out in Eugene who trimmed branches around

electric lines for a living, hauling a chainsaw up and down trees all day. He had stamina like them too. He hadn't said what he did for a living. She doubted he was climbing trees with that foot.

He stood up and walked naked across the floor to an open box, opened it and pulled out what looked to be an old leather-bound book. When he flipped it open, though, it turned out to be a laptop.

Monster sniffed at her and put a cautious foot on her stomach. She decided it was time to get up. Wrapping the acrylic afghan they'd kicked to the foot of the bed around herself, she went and peered over his shoulder.

Tarot cards dotted the screen. He opened a new tab and grabbed her hand. "Here. Shuffle."

She clicked a few times, running the cards through an animation where the deck split and came together again. Then they danced out across the screen in a classic Celtic cross. They didn't mean a thing to her; she'd seen a reader at a street fair once, but that was years ago and she had been drunk.

Caleb seemed to like what he was seeing, though. She waited for him to explain it to her, but he just tapped the one in the middle, the Tower with its lightning and little falling figures, and said, "That's good, that's a good one." Then he snapped the laptop shut. "Wanna get some breakfast?"

In the afternoon, she met Jake at the dog park. The chow hadn't been wearing a collar so it was his now, unless someone responded to the Craigslist ad he had posted.

"I wish you hadn't left with him," Jake said before she was even done scratching the dog's ears. "If animals hate a guy, he's bad news."

"Animals don't hate him, this one dog hates him. He has a great cat."

Jake clicked his teeth. The dog's ears went erect and she sat down, looking at him expectantly until he handed her a treat. Sandy had to admit, she seemed like a pretty smart dog.

"Anyway, what are you calling her?"

"Cassandra, because it will be way more subtle than just saying I told you so when this guy turns out to be a creep."

"Jeez, let it go. I can take care of myself. Anyway, Fluffy says he's good shit."

"How the hell would Fluffy know? He met the dude on Thursday, I was there."

"I'll be fine." The dog whined, looking up at Jake with yearning. He had that kind of effect on animals. "I think you should call her Perdita."

"That's a Dalmatian name. I was thinking maybe Penelope."

"Penny's a good nickname. She is sort of copper-colored."

"We'll see. When the time is right the dog tells you her name."

Caleb called her on Thursday and invited her out to dinner. When she got over to his place, he was reading the tarot again.

"I was thinking Chinese,"

"Is that what . . ." she peered at the screen " . . . the Ace of Cups told you?"

"Something like that," he said, closing the laptop.

"Sounds good to me."

Post-dinner they stopped at the Silver Dollar, where a Johnny Cash cover band was playing, but after a round Caleb seemed antsy.

"It's nice out, let's go start a fire."

"A fire?"

"There's a fire pit out back of my place."

The band was bad, and since Caleb had brought her a Fireball again the heartburn was setting in. "Okay. But if the

cops show up, you can be the one to pretend you have a burn permit.”

“But of course.”

Tonight the sky was clear, and the moon was full. From the fence line between her house and Caleb’s, Sandy could see bats looping in the sky, swerving below the branches and ducking down low over the river. Watching all this, she was a little surprised when Caleb was no longer beside her; even more surprised when he reappeared with an armload of split wood that he shoved at her, but she held onto it as he ducked back into the yard on the other side and returned with another armful.

“Who lives over there?” she asked as they stacked the wood into the fire barrel that someone had built from an old washing machine’s innards.

“Oh, I don’t know, I haven’t met them yet.” He flashed those teeth at her again. “You just helped me steal.”

“Like I said, you’re the one who gets to talk to the cops.” Sandy took a sip from her to-go cup, nonplussed, as Caleb crouched and began working with his lighter. Despite the residual spring damp and the lack of kindling, the fire was going strong in minutes.

“You’re good at that.”

“I am. Want another beer?”

“Sure.”

Caleb returned in minutes with two Fat Tires and Monster, who stalked up to the flames and began pouncing on falling bits of ash.

“Is that safe?” Sandy didn’t want to be the worrywart, but Monster honestly looked like he’d turn into a blaze of Great White proportions if a spark landed on him.

“Oh, of course. He’s flame retardant.”

The wind shifted and smoke blew into her face, so she shifted in turn until she was almost pressed against Caleb’s side. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in.

“Sweetheart. We’re going to have adventures together. You could help me set the world on fire.”

They killed the six-pack around one in the morning. Just as Sandy was about to suggest they run to the gas station for another, Fluffy’s blue Ford Taurus came rattling down the driveway.

“Hey, man.” Fluffy stepped out of the truck, then fished a case of Pabst from the back. Sandy was surprised at the flare of irritation she felt when Caleb dropped her hand and went to take the beer from Fluffy. She’d wanted more beer. She liked Fluffy.

Monster made one figure eight around Fluffy’s boots and then came over to Sandy, sitting at her feet. The night was turning chilly enough that she was grateful for the extra insulation over her toes.

“How’s it going?” Fluffy said, nodding at her and coming over to claim the camp chair Caleb had vacated.

“It’s going.”

“Today has been a real shit show. At one point we had like seventy people in the Break and all of them wanted fancy lattes and shit.”

“Poor you.”

“Sounds like you need another beer, Miss Crankypants.” She did.

Caleb came back with another camp chair, which he parked on the other side of Fluffy, and enough beer to cheer Sandy up for a bit. He raised his hand as if for a high five, but when Fluffy responded, laced his fingers through his hand. “And you, my friend. What are you doing with your life? Do you want to help me set the world on fire?”

Sandy had only thought the phrase weird, earlier. Now she was abruptly sick of it.

Fluffy didn’t pull his hand back, though he wasn’t normally the touchy kind. “Of course I do. So long as I don’t have to sling lattes anymore.”

“And what about you, sweetheart?”

"I'm fine with my lies."

"Your lies? Little stories. Worthless."

"Have you even read any of them?"

"If they're any good, you should just be able to tell them to me. They're not important. Come do something important."

"Not important? A parable is the original mind control."

Caleb was still grinning, but the corner of his mouth twitched in a way that Sandy was pretty sure was deliberate and supposed to look spontaneous. "You're afraid."

"The hell you say." She picked up her beer and stood up, tumbling Monster onto his back. Then she headed for the fence.

"Sandy!" someone said behind her, but it was Fluffy's voice, not Caleb's, and she tossed the beer over her shoulder so she would have both hands free as she scrambled over the fence.

She woke up with no sense of the geography around her, and realized that she'd fallen asleep on the couch with her shoes still on. It was still black night out, and something was tapping against her window.

She sat up and switched off the light. No sense making it easy for whoever it was.

The tapping came again. It was very quiet, more of a bump than a tap. It shouldn't have woken her up. But here she was.

As her eyes adjusted, she was able to make out Monster, perched on her windowsill and head-butting the glass.

"What do you want," she muttered. He kept on head-butting.

"Okay, okay." She stood up, opened the window. He thumped to the floor immediately and then jumped onto the futon.

"Well, at least now he'll have to talk with me when he's sober," she added as she shut the window. "You might be

more comfortable on the bed, big guy. I know I will.”

Monster followed her into the bedroom, leaped onto the pillow.

“Don’t smother me in my sleep, okay? I’ve got it hard enough already.”

There were people shouting somewhere outside. She looked at the clock. Sure enough, closing time.

It was two in the afternoon before she woke up again, and then only because Monster had knocked over the garbage can.

“Do you like eggs?” she asked him, and though he ignored this suggestion to keep pawing at an empty taco wrapper, she threw an extra one into the frying pan anyway. Her head felt like someone had wrapped giant rubber bands around it in her sleep. No more Fireball, she decided. Not worth it to be polite.

Monster was just finishing his egg, served on her second-best plate because there was no third-best plate, when she happened to glance out the living-room window.

The old apartment building over the fence was blackened and broken, roof caved in, windows shattered.

“Jesus Christ, you fucking idiots!” She grabbed for her phone and dialed Fluffy’s number. It kicked directly to voicemail.

It seemed to take a long time to get Jake’s number pulled up from her contacts.

“Are you at the Break right now?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong? You sound freaked.”

“Is Fluffy there this morning?”

“Not that I’ve seen.”

“I think something really bad might have happened. Grab a newspaper.”

There was a moment’s rustling and rearranging. “Oh fuck. Is that the old Victorian right by your apartment?”

"That burned down? Yeah. Caleb lives there, and I know for a fact that Fluffy was over last night."

Jake's long exhale was almost, but not quite, a moan.

"What does it say? When did the fire start? I looked out there at like two and didn't see anything at all, but I heard some noise."

"Let's see . . . shit, you might want to talk to the cops."

"Not if it's going to get Fluffy in trouble."

"I don't think it's going to be a problem for him."

"Shit. Shit shit shit."

"Yeah."

"How? What the hell happened?"

"They found him on the first floor, rearmost apartment. Which looks to be the one where the fire started."

"Yeah, that's Caleb's place."

"Says here it had been unoccupied for a couple months."

Monster jumped onto the couch beside her and began eating the eggs off her plate. "Jake, I think you should call the dog Cassandra."

Jake said something, but it came out more like a sob.

"And this cat," she said, realizing it would make no sense but Jake wasn't listening anyway, "I'm going to call the cat Fluffy Jr."

Catherine and the Satyr

Theodora Goss

“You’ve come back,” said the satyr.

Where was he? Somewhere in the shadows. She could identify him only by the intolerable stench.

“I have an ostrich,” said the Earl of Aberdeen. “An ostrich from Africa, that von Plettemberg sent me. Packed it in the crate he used to ship his port. Damned animal smelled of port for a month. I have an orang-outang, looks as intelligent as the boy here. I bought him off a sailor on an East Indiaman. His name is Ram—Ramnath—some long damned nuisance of a name. I just call him *boy*. Used to get pelicans from India, Buffon would send them to me. Delicate creatures, pelicans, they never live long. Everyone used to go to Buffon, even William of Orange. He always got the best shipments. Have you read his *Histoire Naturelle*? Got one in the library here, and one in London. Damned expensive book. But since the war, you can’t get a thing from France. Now, here’s my wolf. He came from America. Damn the Americans, since the war I can’t even get decent brandy.”

“And the price of stockings! Shocking, I call it,” said Miss Montrose. “Don’t you think so, Mr. Kemble? Mr. Kemble knows all about the price of silk stockings, I assure you, Mrs. Byron.” She tapped Mr. Kemble playfully with her fan.

“Looks a bit mangy now,” said the earl. “Did you feed him those lamb shanks I gave you, eh, boy? He’s frightened of the wolf, doesn’t want to go near him. What do you think I bought you for, you rascal? To sit on your arse all day in the

sun? Get the zebra some water. If Georgie were interested, I'd give him one of my gazelles. But all Georgie cares about is politics. What kind of life is that, for a son of mine? What I want, of course, is an elephant. Not even King Louis, damn the French, has an elephant. But I've got something—I think you'll agree, Kemble, that you won't see anything like this in London, or Paris or Amsterdam either. Now don't get too close. The beast can spit."

Mr. Kemble stepped back from the cage. "Caliban, as I live and breathe. What ho! slave! Caliban! Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself, come forth! You amaze me, sir. Where did you find such a monster?"

"I got him off Buffon, before the war. He cost me almost as much as the zebra. But Prince William has nothing like him, I'll wager. Boy, stir him up with a stick. I warn you, ladies, you're about to see the face of the devil."

"What do you intend to do, if I may ask? Poke me with a stick again?"

What surprised her was not that he could speak. The earl had said that he could speak, "A kind of guttural Greek, that my tutor would have caned out of him." But that he could speak English, with the accent of a gentleman, in which was mingled faintly, mockingly, the accent of the earl.

She shook her head, then realized he might not have seen her. The moon was full—it cast the shadows of his bars over the floor of the cage, over the straw and feces. But he still crouched in a back corner.

"No," she said. "No, I wanted"—what?

"It's your own damned fault, Catherine," said the earl. "Who told you to marry Mad Jack? If you wanted to marry a gambler, you should have married a rich one."

Catherine turned to the window and put her hand over her mouth. It was a useless gesture—what could she have said? She had married him, when everyone in Bath had

warned her against him. "Jack Byron is a devil," Grandmother Gight had told her, "and your life with him will be a hell. Are you ready to live in hell, my girl, for a red coat and the finest legs in Bath?" And for a year, a year that was heaven and hell both, she had been.

"What has he left you, eh? Tell me that."

"My clothes. He has left me my clothes, or most of them. Whatever I've brought with me. And Gight."

She could hear the earl shuffling papers on his bureau.

"Well, I don't want the place, you know. What good is Gight to me? I could give it to Georgie, I suppose. Not that Georgie wants to leave London, damn him. And the roof leaks, like as not. I'll buy it, but I don't want it, and you'll take what I offer, you hear? And I won't give it to you all at once. Two hundred a year—no, a hundred and fifty, that should be enough, if you live in the country. No more silk dresses for you. No more fine balls. That's what comes of marrying a blackguard."

The earl rose—she could hear his chair scraping against the parquet. "When are you going back to him?"

It was spring. The lime avenue was in blossom. She could see it through the window, as though the trees had burst into cloud. "I'm not going back to him. He's gone to Paris, with one of his—with an actress. I'm never going back to him again."

"That's damned foolish. You married him, my girl. Now it's your duty to make the best of him. Even your grandmother would tell you that."

When he had left the parlor, she opened the window and stepped out into the garden. She could smell the lime flowers and, beneath them, subtle but persistent, the smell of the menagerie.

"I don't know," she said.

He had come to the front of the cage. Moonlight shone on his face, grotesque: the flat nose; the slanted eyes, black in

the moonlight; the curving horns. He crouched, bestial, shorter than she was although he would have been taller if he had stood like a man.

“Desire,” he said. “There is nothing in the world but desire. In Paris a man came to me, a man in a black coat, a M. Rousseau. He spoke to me about reason, and told me that I was a pure, an uncorrupted savage. Do you know what I did? I spat in his face. I was in a cage then, in the house of M. Buffon. He wanted to keep me, he would talk to me sometimes in the old language. But he needed money.”

“Would he let you out?”

The grotesque face grinned, and Catherine stepped back, frightened. His teeth were black and broken, and in the moonlight she could see a protrusion from the hair between his thighs.

“He knew better. It was not only the men of learning who visited there, M. Diderot and his friend the mathematician. Poets visited me as well, and one wrote a poem—*the incarnate image of man’s desire*, he called me. We talked together, he and I—his mother was from the old country. Oh, they knew better than to let me out! What I would have done to their systems, their philosophies!”

Suddenly his voice was low, musical. “Do you fear me?”

She shook her head.

“I can smell your fear.” He reached through the bars toward her, his arm hairy and muscular, the fingernails cracked. “I can tell you what you want, Catherine. You want *me*.”

“Who is Miss Montrose?” she asked.

Philip Kemble smiled the famous, lopsided smile that had made even Queen Charlotte remark that she liked Mr. Kemble, only not, of course, as Macbeth. “She plays Rosalind in pink tights. Is that enough of an explanation?”

They were walking beneath the avenue of limes. She played with a blossom, idly.

“Does she know that the earl has a wife and five—no, it must be six—children? She was a cook, originally. Now when she drives in the park, everyone bows to the countess.”

“So does marriage eventually imprison us all! It was a doleful day when Miss Gordon became the matronly Mrs. Byron.”

“Matronly!” He was teasing, of course. He was known as the biggest tease in London. But she was vaguely angry.

“Imagine these fingers, as slender and pale as new moons, frying an egg, now. How incongruous an image! As though Ophelia had taken up knitting, or Cleopatra put on an apron. Surely Miss Gordon, the enchanting Miss Gordon, who marveled over Bath like Miranda introduced to a brave new world, will never be reduced to a housewife!”

He had kissed her hand, and then her arm, and then her shoulder, before she pulled away. But it was clear, he had made it clear, that if she could establish herself in London, “where the former Miss Gordon would certainly be welcomed by all the quality,” she could see Philip Kemble any time she liked. “You have but to call me, Catherine,” he had whispered, while she was attempting to untangle herself from his embrace, which had in it a calculated passion, “and I will come to you, like Ariel to his Prospero.”

She remembered that he had just finished a run of *The Tempest* at Drury Lane.

“They would not let me out,” said the satyr. “Will you?”

When she was a girl, growing up at Gight, she had run through the forest, her bare legs flashing. One day she had found a pool, and she had taken off her clothes, even her shift. She had lowered herself into the cold water. She remembered how cold it had been, how light had fallen through the green leaves, dappling her bare arms.

That afternoon, when she went in for tea, she had been told that she would be sent to Grandmother Gight, in Edinburgh. So she could learn how to be a lady.

"I don't know," she said. Although she had brought the keys. She had taken them from the earl's bureau. They had been in her pocket all afternoon.

"Come, Catherine." How musical his voice was now, no longer harsh—like a wild music heard among the hills at Gight. "Come, what do you think I am? I am the darkness that existed before the light. How long do you think this age of light can last, this age of reason with its *Encyclopédies* and *Histoires*? How long do you think men can deny what is in their hearts? I am madness. I am freedom."

The key glinted in the moonlight. Then the door swung open with a grating, rusted sound, like the cry of an orang-outang.

His hands were strong, too strong. His stench surrounded her, the hairy thighs pressed against her dress, she felt the broken teeth against her tongue. She cried out, a strangled cry, answered only by one of the pelicans.

The cold night air on her legs, the gravel against her back, and above her the grinning face of the moon, the mad white moon, and she was drowning, drowning in pain and the stench of him, and an overwhelming panic. The night closed over her, and she drowned.

"Oh, they don't know the worst of it, my dear. They never do."

Miss Montrose was sitting on the side of her bed, in a pink tea-gown.

"You're lucky I'm the one who found you! What did he do to your dress, shred it? Aberdeen said he would have Ram whipped, for not locking the cage properly. Such a nice boy—once he brought me some of those white flowers for my hair. You should have heard Aberdeen! He was furious about losing his best specimen. But really, after the way that beast, whatever it was, attacked you. Anyway, Ram's disappeared, and I can't say that I blame him.

“Don’t sit up. You poor dear. But as long as they don’t know the worst. I won’t let them in here, you know. I’ve got a will of my own, Mrs. Byron, anyone at Drury Lane can tell you that. And I haven’t told them a thing, not about what the nurse said. How can you tell, I asked her. It’s only been a week. But she said she could always tell. We women should stick together, I always say, although you don’t know what they’re like at Drury Lane. A bunch of cats!

“I’ve always wanted a baby of my own, with itty pink toes, but in the theater, you know, we can’t afford to lose our figures. Well, you’ll be fit to travel soon, now that the fever’s over. And then you’ll be joining Captain Byron, I suppose. Not much choice, is there, for us women, with one on the way? A friend of mine, who plays Olivia, said he was terribly attractive. Aberdeen says he’s in France. Perhaps, you know, since I didn’t tell, you could send me some stockings?”

Yes, she would be joining her husband in France. Catherine turned her face on the pillow and wept—for herself and the world, breaking open like an egg.

The Queen and the Cambion

Richard Bowes

1.

“Silly Billy, the Sailor King,” some called King William IV of Great Britain. But never, of course, to his royal face. Then it was always “Yes, sire,” and “As your majesty wishes!”

Because certain adults responsible for her care didn’t watch their words in front of a child, the king’s young niece and heir to his throne heard such things said. It angered her.

Princess Victoria liked her uncle and knew that King William IV always treated her as nicely as a boozy, confused former sea captain of a monarch could be expected to, and much of the time rather better.

Often when she greeted him, he would lean forward, slip a secret gift into her hands, and whisper something like, “Discovered this in the late king your grandfather’s desk at Windsor.”

These generally were small items, trinkets, jewels, mementos, long-ago tributes from minor potentates that he’d found in the huge half-used royal palaces, stuck in his pocket, and as often as not remembered to give to his niece.

The one she found most fascinating was a piece of very ancient parchment which someone had pressed under glass hundreds of years before. This came into her possession one day when she was twelve as King William passed Victoria and her governess on his way to the royal coach.

His Britannic Majesty paused and said in her ear, “It’s a spell, little cub. Put your paw in mine.”

Victoria felt something in her hand and slipped it into a pouch under her cloak while the Sailor King lurched by as though he was walking the quarterdeck of a ship in rough water. "Every ruler of this island has had it and many of us have invoked it," he mumbled while climbing the carriage steps.

She followed him. "To use in times of great danger to Britain?" she whispered.

He leaned out the window. "Or on a day of doldrums and no wind in the sails," he roared as if she was up in a crow's nest, his face red as semi-rare roast beef. "You'll be the monarch and damn all who'd say you no."

Victoria didn't take the gift from under her cloak until she was quite alone in the library of the dark and dreary palace at Kensington. It was where she lived under the intense care of her mother the widowed Duchess of Kent, a German lady, and Sir John Conroy, a handsome enough Irish army officer of good family.

The duchess had appointed Conroy comptroller of her household. Between them they tried to make sure the princess had no independence at all. Victoria really only got out of their sight when King Billy summoned her to the Royal Court.

Nobody at Kensington ever used the library. She went to the far end of that long room lined with portraits of the obscure daughters and younger sons of various British kings, many with their plump consorts and empty-eyed children. Victoria pushed aside a full-length curtain and in the waning daylight looked at the page.

She deciphered a bit of the script and discovered words in Latin that she knew. She saw the name Arturus, which made her gasp. Other words just seemed to be a collection of letters.

Then for fear that someone was coming she hid it away behind a shelf full of books of sermons by long-dead

clergymen. It was where she kept some other secret possessions, for she was allowed very little privacy.

She knew the pronunciation for the Latin. By copying several of the other words and showing them to her language tutor, she discovered they were Welsh.

Her music teacher, born in Wales, taught her some pronunciation but became too curious about a few of the words she showed him. Victoria then sought out the old stable master who spoke the language, including some of the ancient tongue, and could read and write a bit.

He was honored and kept her secret when the princess practiced with him. One evening when she had learned all the words and her guardians were busy, Victoria went to the library, took out the page, and slowly read it aloud.

She wasn't quite finished when a silver light shone on the dusty shelves and paintings. Before her was a mountaintop with the sun shining through clouds. In the air, heading her way, sailed a man who rode the wind as another might a horse.

In his hand was a black staff topped with a dragon's head. His grey cloak and robes showed the golden moon in all its phases. His white hair and beard whipped about as the wind brought him to the mountaintop.

At the moment he alighted he noticed Victoria. A look of such vexation came over his face that she stumbled on the words and couldn't immediately repeat them. He and the mountaintop faded from her sight. She, however, remembered what she'd seen.

Victoria was no scholar. But the library at Kensington Palace did contain certain old volumes and she read all she could find about Arthur and especially about Merlin.

An observant child like Victoria knew John Conroy was more than the duchess's comptroller. She understood it was his idea to keep her isolated and to have her every move watched. From an early age she knew why.

She heard her uncle tell someone in confidence but with a voice that could carry over wind, waves, and cannon fire, “The mad old man, my father, King George that was, had a coach load and more of us sons. But in the event, only my brother Kent before he died produced an heir, fair, square, and legitimate. So the little girl over there stands to inherit the crown when I go under.”

If the king did “go under” before she was eighteen, Victoria knew, her mother would be regent. The Duchess of Kent would control her daughter and the Royal Court, and Conroy would control the duchess.

In the winter before her eighteenth birthday, five years after he gave her the spell, King William became very ill. But even in sickness, he remembered what the duchess and Conroy were up to. And though his condition was grave, he resolutely refused to die.

On May 24, 1837, Victoria would become eighteen. On May 22 the king was in a coma and the duchess and her comptroller had a plan.

From a window of the library at Kensington Palace Victoria saw carriages drive up through a mid-spring drizzle, saw figures in black emerge. She recognized men Conroy knew: several hungry attorneys, a minor cabinet minister, a rural justice, the secretary of a bishop who believed he should have been an archbishop. They gathered in Conroy’s offices downstairs.

Because the servants were loyal, the princess knew that a document had been prepared in which Victoria would cite her own youth and foolishness and beg that her mother (and her mother’s “wise advisor”) be regent until she was twenty-one.

Even those who admired Victoria would not have said the princess was brilliant, but neither was she dull or naïve. She knew how much damage the conspirators would be able to do in three years of regency. She might never become free. All they needed was her signature.

Understanding what was afoot, Victoria went to the shelf where the manuscript page was hidden. She wondered if she was entitled to do this before she was actually the monarch and if the old wizard would be as angry as the last time.

Victoria heard footsteps on the stairs. She looked at the pictures of her obscure and forgotten ancestors all exiled to the library and made her choice.

The door at the other end of the library opened. The duchess and Conroy entered with half a dozen very solemn men.

“My dearest daughter, we have been trying to decide how best to protect you,” said her mother.

By the light of three candles Victoria stood firm and recited the Latin, rolled out the Welsh syllables the way she’d been taught.

Duchess and accomplice exchanged glances. Madness was commonplace in the British dynasty. George III had been so mad that a regent had been appointed.

They started toward Victoria, then stopped and stared. She turned and saw what they did—a great stone hall lit by shafts of sun through tall windows. The light fell on figures including a big man crowned and sitting on a throne.

Victoria saw again the tall figure in robes adorned with golden moons in all their phases. In his hand was the black staff topped with a dragon’s head. This time his hair and beard were iron gray, not white. He shot the king a look of intense irritation. The king avoided his stare and seemed a bit amused.

Merlin strode out of the court at Camelot and the royal hall vanished behind him. Under his breath he muttered, “A curse upon the day I was so addled as to make any oath to serve at the beck and call of every halfwit or lunatic who planted a royal behind on the throne of Britain.”

Then he realized who had summoned him to this dim and dusty place, and his face softened just a bit. Not a monarch yet to judge by her attire. But soon enough she would be.

Victoria gestured toward the people gaping at him. Merlin was accustomed to those who tried to seize power using bloody axes, not pieces of paper. But a wizard understands the cooing of the dove, the howl of the wolf, and the usurper's greed.

He leveled his staff and blue flames leaped forth.

The documents Conroy held caught fire, and he dropped them. The red wig on one attorney and the ruffled cuffs of the bishop's secretary also ignited. Since none of them would ever admit to having been there none would ever have to describe how they fled, the men snuffing out flames, barely pausing to let the duchess go first.

When they were gone, Merlin erased the fire with a casual wave. Easy enough, he thought. Nothing like Hastings or the Battle of Britain. Shortly he'd be back in Camelot giving the king a piece of his mind.

"Lord Merlin . . . ," the young princess began, "We thank you."

A wizard understands a bee and a queen equally. And both can understand a wizard. Merlin spoke and she heard the word "Majesty" in her head. He dropped to one knee and kissed her hand. For young Victoria this was their first meeting. For Merlin it was not.

Time was a path that crossed itself again and again and memory could be prophecy. Later in her life, earlier in his, this queen would summon him.

He had a certain affection for her. But in his lifetime he'd already served all four of the Richards, five or six of the Henrys, the first Elizabeth, the ever-tiresome Ethelred, Saxon Harold, Norman William, and a dozen others.

He waited for her to dismiss him. But Victoria said in a rush of words, "I read that you are a cambion born of Princess Gwenddydd by the incubus Albercanix. She became a nun after your birth." The princess was enthralled.

Merlin met her gaze, gave the quick smile a busy adult has for a child. One trick that always distracted monarchs

was to show how they came to have power over such a one as he.

The wizard waved his hand and Victoria saw the scene after Mount Badon, the great victory which made Arthur king of Britain. That day Merlin ensorcelled seven Saxon wizards, Arthur slew seven Saxon kings, and may well have saved his sorcerer's life.

For this princess Merlin mostly hid the gore away. He showed her Arthur and himself younger, flushed with victory and many cups of celebratory mead as in gratitude the wizard granted the king any wish within his power to give.

"Neither of us knew much law so it wasn't well thought out," he explained, and showed himself swearing an oath to come forevermore to the aid of any monarch of Britain who summoned him. "But my time is precious and must not be wasted," he told her.

Even this mild version left Victoria round-eyed with wonder, as was Merlin's intent. For certain monarchs his message could be so clear and terrifying that Richard III had gone to his death on Bosworth Field and Charles I had let his head be whacked off without trying to summon him.

For a moment wizard and princess listened and smiled at the sounds downstairs of carriages fleeing into the night.

He bowed, asked if there was anything more she desired. When she could think of nothing he bowed once more, stepped backward through the bookshelves and the wall of Kensington Palace.

She watched as the great hall of the castle with its knights and king appeared and swallowed up Merlin.

2.

"I am ruled by our young queen and happily so, as is every man of fair mind in this land," said Lord Melbourne, Queen

Victoria's first prime minister. And for a brief time that was true.

Melbourne could be a bit of a wizard, producing parliamentary majorities out of nothing, or making them disappear without a trace. A few years into young Victoria's reign, gossip held she was in the palm of his hand.

In fact she found him charming, but with her mother left behind at Kensington Palace and John Conroy exiled to the Continent, the headstrong young queen was led by no one.

The dusty castles and palaces in London and Windsor were lately the haunts of drunken and sometimes deranged kings. She opened them up and gathered visiting European princes and her own young equerries and ladies-in-waiting for late-night feasts and dances.

Then Lord Melbourne explained to her that the people of Britain were unhappy with their monarch. "The time has come," he said, "for you to find a husband, produce an heir, and ensure stability. The choice of a groom will be yours, an opportunity and a peril. Like every marriage."

Victoria's first reaction was anger. But she knew that few women of any rank got to choose their husbands. Her choices were wide. The eligible princes of Europe paraded through Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle.

Victoria and the Grand Duke Alexander of Russia danced the wild mazurka. Young equerries of her staff had her picture on lockets next to their hearts in the hope that she might decide to marry into her nobility and select one of them.

The nation was fascinated with its legendary past and so was its queen. She dreamed of sending the candidates on quests, having them do great deeds. But she knew that wasn't possible.

Victoria's resentment of the task made her unable to decide among the candidates. Naturally, everyone grew impatient—the potential grooms, the government, and the people of England.

As the situation worsened, the queen considered invoking Merlin, but she felt intimidated. Then Melbourne himself said the future of Britain hung on her decision. She thought this surely was a moment to summon the wizard.

One evening in her private chambers she drew out the parchment and ran through the invocation.

Immediately the light of the oil lamps in her room was drowned by sunlight shining on ocean waves, pouring through windows of clearest glass into a room blue as the sea around it.

Despite his robes with the golden moon in all its phases, it took her a few moments to recognize the tall figure with dark hair and beard standing over a giant tortoise that rested on an oaken table.

Victoria watched fascinated as he stopped what he was doing and said good-bye effusively but quickly to a figure with liquid green eyes and saucy silver back flippers. The Sea King's Daughter and her palace disappeared as he strode into Victoria's private drawing room.

Merlin in the full flush of his wizardry had just murmured, "Gryphons and Guilfoils, marjoram and unicorn mange, the heart of Diana's own rabbit soaked in the blood of hummingbirds from the Emperor's gardens in far Cathay . . ."

Then he'd felt the summons, turned, seen Victoria, and lost track of the spell he was working. But a summons when it came had to be obeyed.

It could originate at any point in the long history of Britain's monarchy from the Battle of Badon on. And each caught him at a moment in his life when he was deep into weaving magic and casting spells. At his most powerful he was at his most vulnerable.

He stepped out of a place where each drinking cup had a name and every chair an ancestry into a room with walls covered by images of flowers and pictures of bloodless

people. The floor was choked with furniture and every single surface was covered with myriad small objects.

Merlin had encountered Victoria when he was just a youth and she was middle-aged. That meeting would, of course, not have happened to her yet.

Now in her private apartments at Windsor Palace he knelt before Victoria, whose expression was full of curiosity about the tortoise, the palace, the creature with the flippers, and him.

But what she said was, "I brought you here because my prime minister and my people have decided I must marry for the good of Britain. I need your help to make the right decision."

And he told her as patiently as he could, "In the palace of the Sea King's Daughter, as an act of charity I was working a spell to restore the zest of life to an ancient tortoise. It houses within itself the soul of Archimedes, the great mage of legendary times. This is the sort of favor I hope someone might someday perform if I ever needed it.

"It was all about to come together: ingredients at hand, incantation memorized, pentagrams and quarter-circles drawn, the tortoise staring up with hope in its eyes."

She sat amazed by this and by the man, dark-bearded and thirty years younger than when she'd seen him a few years before.

Victoria dreamed of turning her kingdom into a kind of Camelot, a land of castles, enchanted woods, knights in armor, and maidens under sleeping spells floating down rivers. She looked at Merlin now and thought of how perfectly he would fit into such a world.

Merlin understood. He was young, vain, and used to being wanted. He found himself liking her, but memories of the complications and quarrels after an extended tumble with Elizabeth I reminded him how unwise such liaisons could be.

His interest at that moment was getting back as quickly as possible to the life he'd had to leave.

Victoria watched him stand at the floor-length windows and stare out into the night. When he gestured, one window blew open.

Any wizard is a performer and Merlin intended to bedazzle her. He held out his right arm, candlelight danced, and a bird appeared. The shadow of a raptor rested on his wrist and seemed to flicker like a flame.

Merlin had summoned a questing spirit, the ghost of the Lord of Hawks. He whistled a single note and it became solid, all angry, unblinking eyes and savage beak.

The wizard filled a clear crystal bowl with water and said, "Your majesty, give me the name of a suitor."

She named the Grand Duke Alexander of Russia. Merlin held the hawk near the bowl which was so clear that the water seemed to float in air.

He whispered the grand duke's name and looked at the surface of the water. On it he saw Alexander's fate, a winter scene with blood on the snow. An anarchist had hurled the bomb that tore the Tsar apart.

Merlin knew Victoria was not a vicious soul. If she saw this particular piece of the future it would be hard for her to keep it a secret from the Tsar-to-be. And it was best not to upset the balance of the world. Undoing that would require more magic than he had.

So he looked at the young queen and shook his head—this one was not suitable. She looked but he had already cleared away the image.

"Who is your majesty's next suitor?"

Victoria spoke the name, Merlin relayed it to his medium, and the image of a mildly retarded prince of Savoy floated in the bowl. He shook his head, she looked relieved, and they ran through some more European royalty.

Merlin knew the man he was looking for, the one she actually had married. He'd seen pictures galore at that time in her future and his past when he'd been summoned by this queen.

She stared at Merlin as she smiled and said, "Lord Alfred Paget." This was the most dashing of her young courtiers. A royal equerry of excellent family, he made no secret of his romantic love for his queen.

She in turn was charmed and more than a bit taken with Paget. He would be her choice if she decided to marry one not of royal birth.

But Merlin knew that wasn't the name he was looking for. When an image floated on the water, it actually made Merlin grin. He let Victoria see the once dashing Paget fat, self-satisfied, and seventy years old.

"Oh dear. This will not do!" she said with a horrified expression. Then she and the wizard laughed.

This search for a husband was far more pleasant than much of what he did in service to the Badon oath. Merlin had seen an unfaithful royal princess killed in Paris by flashing lights and a willful, runaway machine. He had visited a distant time when the king of Britain was not much more than a picture that moved.

Victoria gave the name and title of Albert, Prince of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. A glance at the face floating on the water was all Merlin needed. This was the one he'd been waiting for.

Albert would die long before Victoria did and she would mourn him for the rest of her life. A hardier husband might be in order. But Albert was the one she was destined to marry and that was how it would be.

The image floating in the bowl was flattering. Merlin invited the queen to look, indicated his approval, and congratulated her.

His task done, Merlin prepared to leave. Victoria realized this and looked stricken.

Anyone, be they human or cambion, enjoys being found attractive. And to have won the heart of a queen was better still. Merlin bowed deeply to the monarch and wished her great happiness in her marriage.

As he strode out of her presence, Victoria saw the tortoise that contained the soul of Archimedes and the sun dancing on the waves outside the palace and the lovely daughter of the one who rules the tides.

The queen noted every detail and wondered if her kingdom could ever contain anything so beautiful. She wrote a letter to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha as she thought of Merlin.

3.

“Twenty-five years into her reign, her majesty has abandoned her responsibilities.”

“Since poor Prince Albert died, I hear she wears nothing but mourning clothes . . . ”

“The processes of government demand the public presence of a monarch.”

“ . . . and talks to the trees at Windsor Palace, like her daft grandfather did . . . ”

“No one in her royal household, her government, and especially her family dares to broach the subject to her.”

“ . . . curtsies to them trees as well, I got told.”

Isolated as a monarch is, Victoria heard the nonsense her people were saying. She knew they said she talked to her late husband as she walked the halls of Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle, of Balmoral in Scotland and Osborne House on the Isle of Wight.

And here they were right, sometimes she did. More than anything else, what she had lost with the death of the man to whom she'd been married for twenty years was the one person in Britain who could speak to her as an equal. She still spoke to him, but there was no reply. She felt utterly alone.

At Osborne House after a day with little warmth in the sun she stood at a window with a wind coming in from the sea

and thought of Merlin.

Indeed with its graceful Italianate lines, fountains, and views of the water, Osborne was Victoria's attempt to evoke the glimpses she'd caught of the palace of the Sea King's Daughter. She envied that royal family as she did no other.

In the years of her marriage she had sometimes remembered the handsome wizard of their last meeting and always with a pang of guilt. It almost felt as if she had betrayed the marriage. In her widowhood, though, she thought about him more often.

That evening at Osborne, Victoria demanded she be completely alone in her private apartments. The queen debated with herself as to whether this was a time of danger to the crown or, as her uncle had said, a day of doldrums and no wind in the sails.

Victoria finally decided it was a good deal of both. She took the glass-bound page out of its hiding place and read the summons aloud. Immediately she saw half-naked people in savage garb looking up at a huge picture that moved. It showed some kind of carriage without horses racing down a dark, smooth road.

As monarch of a forward-looking nation, the queen had been shown zoetropes and magic lanterns. This appeared far more like real life, except that it moved too fast. Her royal train was always an express and its engine could attain speeds of almost fifty miles an hour. But that was as nothing to what this machine seemed to do.

A man, who looked familiar, like a distant cousin perhaps, sat in it smiling. "In this driver's seat everyone is a king," he said.

The queen couldn't know that she'd just had a glimpse of a distant successor. In the year 2159 King Henry X had on a permanent loop in his offices what he called "My Agincourt." The great triumph of his reign was being named spokesperson for Chang'an/Ford/Honda, the world's mightiest automaker.

Victoria saw that the people who had been looking up at the image were now frozen, staring at a figure running straight toward her.

This one had long dark hair but no sign of a beard, was tall but not quite as tall as the Merlin she remembered. He looked very young. Instead of robes he wore what Victoria identified as some form of men's underclothes, a thing about which she made a point of knowing nothing. As he stepped into her room she saw emblazoned on the shirt the lion and the unicorn, the royal crest, directly over his heart.

Victoria had sons and she placed this boy as sixteen at most. She stared at him and said, "You're just a child. Who are you? Where are your proper clothes? And how did you get here?"

Merlin, after a moment of surprise, looked this small woman in black directly in the eyes, which none had done since Albert. Victoria heard him say, "I am Merlin, the cambion of Albercanix and Gwenddydd. I was apprenticed to Galapas, the Hermit of the Crystal Cave, a disagreeable old tyrant.

"One morning, running through my spells, I found myself summoned by Henry X, king of Britain. I was working a great magic on his courtiers when you called me here."

He glanced down at the soft clothes and shoes which still puzzled him. "And this is the livery of that king." He seemed confused.

When the young wizard first arrived in 2159, King Henry peered at him over a glass and said, "Not what I expected. Just curious as to whether this old piece of parchment actually worked—needed something to remind myself and others of the old mystique of royalty. Perhaps you could turn a few advertising people into mice. It'll teach them to respect me and the monarchy in its last days."

Victoria saw in this confused, gangling lad the man she'd encountered. The queen realized that King Arthur and the Badon Oath were well in his future and that he didn't

understand what had happened to him. It occurred to her that the child of a demon and a princess who became a nun might be as separate and alone as she was.

“Your attire simply won’t do,” she said.

Merlin discovered that unlike King Henry this monarch was greatly respected. All the servants deferred to her and some courtiers were even afraid.

The queen had a trusted footman and pageboy dress this stranger in clothes her sons had outgrown. Merlin hated the infinite buttons and hooks, the itching flannel and stiff boots.

Victoria passed him off as a young visiting kinsman, “From the Anhalt-Latvia cousins.”

Merlin remembered King Henry, so full of strange potions and drinks he sometimes had trouble standing and often couldn’t remember who Merlin was.

The young wizard had tried not to show how bedazzled he was by the magic of that court, lights that came and went with the wave of a hand, cold air that seeped out of walls to cool a kingdom where it was always hot outdoors, unseen musicians who beat drums, sang, played harps of incredible variety through the day and night without tiring.

The king’s entourage was so amazed by Merlin’s spells of invisibility and the way he could turn them into frogs and back into courtiers that they lost any interest in their monarch and flocked around him.

They persuaded Merlin to surrender his own rough robes and gave him shorts, T-shirts, and soft shoes like everyone else in the kingdom. He had never worn clothes with legs or felt fabric as light.

All he knew for certain was that he didn’t want to return to the Crystal Cave and the Hermit. He spent some amazing days and light-filled nights in the court of 2159.

Victoria, everyone agreed, seemed more cheerful since the appearance of her strange relative. The two of them took walks together and he showed her nixies riding in on the

morning waves and sprites dancing by moonlight. He turned her pug dog into a trained bear and turned it back again.

Merlin didn't understand this world in which palaces and castles all looked utterly indefensible, ruins had been built just to be ruins, and the queen's knights seemed an unlikely band of warriors without a missing eye or gouged out nose among them.

On their walks Victoria sometimes ran on about wanting to create a court full of art and poetry like King Arthur at Camelot. It amazed her that he understood none of this. So she told him the bits and pieces she had learned over the years about the Badon Oath and Arthur's kingdom. The young mage was fascinated.

Once she made Merlin sit through a chamber music concert and talked afterward about "The melodies of the wonderful Herr Mendelssohn to whom I could listen forever." He told her about the court of her descendent Henry X where invisible musicians played all day and all night.

He could have told her more about the future of her kingdom, but out of respect and even affection he never much mentioned her descendant. Never described seeing King Henry in a false crown, armor, and broadsword quaff "Royal English Ale" from a horn cup and signify his approval. Never said how he'd sampled the ale and found it so vile he spat it out.

When he finished that endorsement, the king had turned and seen the shocked expression on young Merlin's face. He said, "I'm the last, you know. I'm preserved in so many formats that they'll never need another king for their ads. I've no children that I know of and no one is interested in succeeding me. I'm sorry I let you see all this." He started to cry great drunken tears.

Merlin walked away as quickly as he could. He strode into the room where his majesty's greatest promotional moments played on a screen. He didn't know where he was going but he headed for a door and the blazing-hot outdoors.

When some of his majesty's courtiers tried to stop him he froze them in place with a spell. At that moment of his magic Victoria's summons rescued him.

For that and her stories he would always be grateful. But he was young, male, and a wizard and this was a queen's court with many young women attached to it.

Merlin had a fine rumpus of a rendezvous in a linen closet with an apprentice maid of the wardrobe and another more leisurely meeting with a young lady-in-waiting in her chamber.

Spells to blank the memories of passersby didn't quite dispel the stories. The queen steadfastly refused to hear this gossip.

But she understood how keeping him there was as unnatural as imprisoning a wild animal. She ordered certain clothing to be made. One day Merlin returned to his rooms and found on the bed robes and a cloak with the moon in all its phases and fine leather boots like the ones her majesty had noticed older Merlin's wearing.

The youth had never seen anything so splendid. He changed and went to her private rooms where she was waiting. "Sir Merlin, you have fulfilled and more the tasks for which you were summoned," she said and he saw how hard this was for her. "You are dismissed with our thanks and the certainty we will meet again."

Merlin bowed low. And before the royal tears came, or his own could start, he found himself hurtling backward through the centuries to the hermit Galapas and the Crystal Cave.

Merlin didn't linger there but immediately set out across Wales, finding within himself the magic to cover miles in minutes. One story Victoria had told was of a king trying to build a castle before his enemies were upon him.

Each day the walls would be raised and each night they would be thrown down. All were in despair until a bold youth in a cloak of moons appeared. He tamed two dragons that

fought every night in the caves below the castle and made the walls collapse. Merlin knew he was that youth.

4.

“Queen Victoria,” a commentator said at her Golden Jubilee, “inherited a Britain linked by stagecoach and reigned in a Britain that ran on rails. She ruled over a quarter of the globe and a quarter of its people.”

At Balmoral Castle in the Highlands late in her reign the queen went into high mourning because a gamekeeper, John Brown, had died.

“Mrs. Brown mourns dead husband,” was how a scurrilous underground London sheet put it.

In fact, Brown, belligerent, hard-drinking, and rude to every person at court except her majesty, was the only one on Earth who spoke to her as one human being to another.

He died unmourned by anyone but the queen. But she mourned him extravagantly. Memorial plaques were installed; statuettes were manufactured.

He was gone but the court’s relief was short-lived. To commemorate becoming Empress of India, Victoria imported servants from the subcontinent. Among them was Abdul Karim who taught her a few words of Hindi. For this the queen called him “the Munshi” or teacher and appointed him her private secretary.

Soon the Munshi was brought along to state occasions, allowed to handle secret government reports, introduced to foreign dignitaries. He engaged in minor intrigue and told her majesty nasty stories about his fellow servants.

The entire court wished the simple, straightforward Mr. Brown was back. Victoria’s children, many well into middle age, found the Munshi appalling. The government worried about its state secrets.

“Indian cobra in queen’s parlor,” the slander sheets proclaimed.

The queen would hear nothing against him. But she knew he wasn’t what she wanted.

“Oh the cruelty of young women and the folly of old men,” Merlin cried as he paced the floor in the tower of glass that was his prison cell.

Nimue the enchantress who beguiled his declining years had turned against him, used the skills he’d taught her to imprison him.

When he was a boy, Queen Victoria had told him about King Uther Pendragon, whose castle walls collapsed each night. Solving that, young Merlin won the confidence of Pendragon. The birth of the king’s son Arthur, hiding the infant from usurpers, the sword in the stone, the kingdom of Britain, and all the rest had followed from that.

But Victoria never told Merlin about Nimue. She thought it too sad.

“Sired by an incubus, baptized in church, tamer of dragons, advisor to kings, I am a cambion turned into a cuckold,” he wailed.

Most of his magic had deserted him. He hadn’t even enough to free himself. Still he did little spells, turned visiting moths into butterflies, made his slippers disappear and reappear. Merlin knew he had a reason for doing this but couldn’t always remember what it was.

Then one morning while making magic he found himself whisked from the tower and summoned to a room crammed full of tartan pillows and with claymore swords hung on the walls as decoration. Music played in the next room and an old lady in black looked at him kindly.

The slump of his shoulders, the unsteadiness of his stance, led the Queen of England, the Empress of India, to rise and lead him over to sit on the divan next to her.

“That music you hear is a string quartet playing a reduction of Herr Mendelssohn’s ‘Scottish Symphony,’ ” she said. “Musicians are on call throughout my waking hours. You told me long ago this was how things were arranged at the Royal Court in 2159.”

It was a brisk day and they drank mulled wine. “The sovereign of Britain requires a wizard to attend Her,” she said, “for a period of time which She shall determine.”

Merlin realized he was rescued. And when the Munshi walked into the room unannounced, the Wizard stood to his full height. Seeing a white-bearded man with flashing eyes and sparks darting from his hands, the Munshi fled.

Everyone at Balmoral marveled at the day her majesty put aside her secretary and gave orders that he was not to approach her. All wondered if someone else had taken his place but no evidence of that could ever be found.

People talked about the eccentricities of Queen Victoria’s last years: the seat next to hers that she insisted always be kept empty in carriages, railroad cars, at state dinners, the rooms next to hers that must never be entered.

At times the queen would send all the ladies and servants away from her chambers and not let them in until next morning.

Some at court hinted that all this had shaded over into madness and attributed it to heredity. Most thought it was just old age, harmless and in its way charmingly human.

In fact a few members of her court did see things out of the corners of their eyes. Merlin could conjure invisibility but his concentration was no longer perfect.

Her majesty walking over the gorse at Balmoral in twilight, on the shore on a misty day at Osborne, in the corridors of Windsor Castle would suddenly be accompanied by a cloaked figure with a white beard and long white hair. When the viewer looked again he would have disappeared.

She talked to Merlin about their prior meetings and how she cherished each of them. The wizard would once have

sneered at the picturesque ruins and the undefendable faux castles that dotted the landscape near any royal residence. Now he understood they had been built in tribute to the sage who'd saved the young princess, the handsome magician who had helped choose her husband, the quicksilver youth of her widowhood.

When she finally became very ill at Windsor, Queen Victoria had ruled for more than sixty years. Merlin remembered that this was the time when she would die.

He stayed with her, put in her mind the things he knew she found pleasing, summoned up music only she could hear. He wondered if, when she was gone, he would be returned to Nimue and the tower.

"She assumed the throne in the era of Sir Walter Scott and her reign has lasted into the century of Mr. H. G. Wells," the Times of London said.

In the last days when her family came to see her, Victoria had the glass with the parchment inside it under her covers. Merlin stood in a corner and was visible only to the queen.

When her son who would be Edward VII appeared, Merlin shook his head. This man would never summon him. It was the same with her grandson who would be George V.

A great-grandchild, a younger son who stammered, was brought in with his brothers. Merlin nodded: this one would summon him to London decades later when hellfire fell from the skies.

The boy was called back after he and his brothers had left, was given the parchment, and shown how to hide it.

"You are my last and only friend," Victoria told Merlin. He held her hands when she died and felt grief for the first time in his life. But he wasn't returned to his glass prison.

Uninvited, invisible, utterly alone at the funeral, he followed the caisson that bore the coffin through the streets of Windsor, carried the only friend he'd ever had to the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore.

“We say of certain people, ‘She was a woman of her time,’ ” an orator proclaimed. “But of how many can it be said that the span of their years, the time in which they lived, will be named for them?”

“A bit of her is inside each one of us,” said a woman watching the cortege. “And that I suppose is what a legend is.”

In the winter twilight with snow on the ground, Merlin stood outside the mausoleum. “I don’t want to transfer my mind and soul to another human or beast, and I won’t risk using that magic and getting summoned. There’s no other monarch I wish to serve.”

He remembered the Hermit of the Crystal Cave. Old Galapas hadn’t been much of a teacher, but Merlin had learned the Wizard’s Last Spell from him. It was simple enough and he hadn’t forgotten.

Merlin invoked it and those who had lingered in the winter dusk saw for a moment a figure with white hair and beard, wearing robes with the moon in all its phases.

The old wizard waved a wand, shimmered for a moment, then appeared to shatter. In the growing dark what seemed like tiny stars flew over the mausoleum, over Windsor, over Britain and all the world.

Sleep of Reason

Halli Villegas

Allison wondered if she had enough time to phone Owen before lunch. She stared at the picture of the two of them pinned above her phone, right under the Anne Traynor card that said *Domestically Disabled*. This is my kingdom, she thought, where she kept her heels under the desk in case she had to go into a meeting, and where a locked drawer held granola bars, a hairbrush, and an extra pair of nylons, just as recommended in *Marie Claire*. Allison hated granola bars and the nylons were seconds from Winners that she had thought were basic black, but turned out to be black with a sheer lace pattern and no control top. She'd never wear them. No, she decided, stuffing her paperback into her purse, she'd call Owen when she got back from lunch, or on her cell after she ate, depending on how energetic she felt. At the block of elevators Janey Joon was standing there, Janey had pushed the down button, but Allison gave it another push for good measure.

"Hey, Allison, how's it going?" Janey asked in a dispirited way. Her team had just lost the Kellogg's account, a really important account, so now Janey had to work on the Depends account, which was in no way as sexy as the Kellogg's account which had meant free cereal and breakfast bars in the break room. No one wanted free Depends.

"Busy. Are you going into that meeting in Superstar this afternoon?"

"No." Janey paused and looked at Allison mournfully. "Team leaders only."

The elevator doors pinged open and Allison felt a little guilty because she had forgotten that Janey was not a team leader. Allison hadn't really meant to remind Janey that she, Allison, was a team leader, of the newly formed digital team, which was handling all digital media accounts, she felt bad if it had been seen that way. But in another way she didn't really feel bad because Allison believed that Asian women had it easier, and Janey with her perfect black hair, and flat stomach was no exception. Janey had had a meteoric rise until the Kellogg's debacle. Everyone always thought that Asian women were smarter, something about the eyes. Allison suspected thinking like this made her a racist, but she never said anything out loud, so maybe it didn't count.

On the elevator both Allison and Janey busied themselves reading text messages real or nonexistent. When they got to the lower level where the food court and shops were, they went opposite directions. Usually Allison went to lunch with one or two other people from the office. Sometimes they went to the Italian restaurant across the street and had a naughty glass of wine with their pasta and talked too loudly, but today she was having her lunch a lot later than usual. As a new team leader she had all sorts of responsibilities that hadn't been there before.

She waited in line at Starbucks for her venti latte and one of those yogurt things with granola in the plastic cup. She stared at the white and green logo. What or who was that image with the implacable eyes, the flowing hair, and the star on her forehead? From an advertising perspective Allison wondered what it symbolized and tried to think about how it was affecting her and her desire for a coffee.

"Nice shoes."

Allison turned around. There was a man sitting at a table near where she was in line. Was he talking to her? She looked down at her shoes to see which ones she was wearing. They were her red suede wedges, they *were* nice

shoes. They were sexy shoes. She looked up at him and he was smiling at her. He *had* been talking to her. Allison wondered how she had missed him when she came in. The man was so handsome it was almost ridiculous. Dark hair, blue eyes, white shirt with the sleeves rolled up over the forearms and black suspenders. Who wore suspenders in this day and age? Allison smiled at him. The line moved forward, she threw off what she hoped was a nonchalant “thanks” and turned back around. God, he was gorgeous. She debated whether or not to turn around again, to look at him once more. No, too desperate, hey wait, she wasn’t desperate, she had a boyfriend, in fact maybe she would call Owen right now. She turned so that she could see the man under the guise of getting the best light for her contact list. The man was still sitting at the table, staring moodily out of the window. His profile was amazing.

She started scanning her list, squinting as if she was having trouble seeing it, looking up occasionally as if to remember the number. The man was looking directly at her now. He smiled once more—his teeth were so white, and there was a dimple that flicked in and out. And then he winked at her. Allison smiled back again, blushing at the little flame of desire that had leapt up when he winked, and turned to face the wide suited shoulders of the man in line ahead of her. Then she pretended to check the heel on her shoe. The man was still there, still watching her. She tossed her hair. What would she say to him when she got out of line? Would he approach her? She needed a clever funny approach, quick. The damn efficient baristas had gotten through the line already and Allison was up. Why couldn’t she come up with a goddamn quip? She ordered her latte and her yogurt, and came out of line pretending not to look. She glanced up, smiling and the man, the beautiful man, was gone. Gone. How had he left, thrown out his cup, and made it out the door without her noticing?

All day in the office she thought about the man, even through the meeting, which she allowed Aaron the web geek to lead because she was the team leader and could do things like that. It was called empowering your team members. She wondered how to find the man again. Maybe he would be back in Starbucks tomorrow. What had the suspenders been about? She bet he was a waiter, she hadn't seen a suit jacket. Well, she would look in all the local restaurants. Maybe he owned a restaurant. That was more likely. But wouldn't you get coffee in your own restaurant in that case? Some people were addicted to Starbucks, she'd heard they put something in the coffee, or was that Tim Hortons?

Speculation, fantasy about showing up with him at the next Christmas party, about being naked together in a brass bed with white sheets frothing with lace, distracted her so she forgot to call Owen.

The next day Allison insisted on taking her team to the bistro that was a few blocks from the office. This lunch would be a team-building exercise, a chance to get to know the others and to really listen to their ideas. She reasoned that if the man worked in or owned the Italian place they usually went to she would have seen him by now, besides there was something French about him. The hostess at the bistro was a skinny blonde wearing a cheap dress from Le Château. Allison nonchalantly asked while they were being seated about the evening maître d', who apparently was not a maître d' but yet another underdressed first-year university bimbo named Kimber.

All through lunch Allison looked around the restaurant as surreptitiously as possible, checking every waiter and busboy and bartender, every man seated in every banquette and at every table.

Frustrated, on her way to the ladies' room she wandered into the kitchen as if by mistake, but everyone was yelling in

Spanish and looked at her like she was Immigration so she backed out after a quick glance told her he wasn't there.

Someone on her team asked her if she had lost something and she looked at them astounded, she had forgotten they were there.

That night she and Owen went out to eat and then sat around her place watching *The Full Monty*. Later, with the cat sitting on the end of the bed batting at their bare feet occasionally, they had sex. Allison closed her eyes and imagined the man. He was there whispering in her ear, smelling of spice and sweat, knowing all her favourite places and touches. It was so real that when she opened her eyes and saw Owen's love-filled face as he laboured stolidly above her she had to bite her tongue from screaming in dismay.

As Owen snored beside her she dreamt about being in Starbucks again. The man was there, waiting for her at a table in the back corner. The fact that Starbucks had red velvet-flocked wallpaper and low lighting provided by crystal chandeliers made no difference, she still knew it was Starbucks. The man was wearing his white shirt and black suspenders, he handed her a latte and a slice of lemon-poppyseed cake, something she loved but rarely ate because it had so many calories. He winked at her and in the dream she felt his hand on her thigh. She asked him what he did and he said he was an executive and she had known it all along.

Afterwards they made love for hours and although the bed was not brass with white lace-edged sheets it was just as good because it was his in a shadowy manly apartment with a gorgeous view and the bedding smelt of him, dark, meaty and that crisp chlorine smell of sperm. Allison woke up with a smile on her face, sore between her legs, and turned over to see Owen with his mouth open and sleep in his eyes. She wanted to cry. Maybe her dream was telling her

something. Where was it the man had said he worked? He was an executive, right, but where, where?

She prodded Owen. "Oh, for fuck's sake, Owen, get up and brush your teeth, your breath stinks."

For a month and a half Allison spent every lunch hour and most of her after work time looking for the man. She went to all the restaurants within a twenty-block radius of her office, but she seldom actually ate lunch, because if she did not see him in one restaurant, she would back out pretending that she had mistaken the place she was supposed to be meeting her co-workers. Even though he had said he was an executive in her dream, her rational mind said it was more likely first thought right thought and the man worked at an upscale bar or bistro. She took fifteen-minute breaks and would ride the elevator up and down hoping he might get on at one floor or another. Every time the door opened her stomach dropped at the possibility he might be there. She went to the Starbucks so often they knew her order by heart and never tried to offer her the day's special blend.

Sometimes instead of restaurants, on the off chance her dream was right she would pick a random floor and walk into offices pretending she was looking for someone whose business card she had lost. She would describe the man. Occasionally someone would be called out, and she would wait in anticipation, thinking of what she would say, how she would explain, but it was never the man she was looking for.

She widened her search to the office buildings beside her own, then two or three over. She sat at her desk and strategized, fantasized, sometimes going to the bathroom next to the maintenance room in the basement of the building and masturbating, using her latest dream to excite her. Because every night he was there, in her dreams. At Starbucks, sometimes decorated with red-flocked wall paper, sometimes with the standard Starbucks tables and chairs, but always the glass cases that usually held biscotti and

muffins instead held beautiful shoes and jewelry and red velvet hearts that oozed droplets of blood down the glass fronts. He would touch her arm and tell her to choose whatever she liked. Then they would go back to his place.

Sometimes his house was all Corbusier glass and chrome, sometimes it was an arts-and-crafts dream with warm woods, a Stickley grandfather clock chiming the hours as they made love on a kilim in front of his stone fireplace. She could feel the rough fibres of the rug on her back and thighs and it excited her, though she knew she would be red and raw in the morning. Night after night they would have perfect sex. He would run his tongue along her arm to her armpit, kiss the nape of her neck; bring her to orgasm after orgasm. With her tongue she would trace the veed muscles that ran from either side of his navel to his groin, the long hollow in the muscle of the side of his thigh, licking, desperate to make him real, to make him materialize in the waking world, but every morning she was alone in her bed.

She kicked Owen to the curb over sushi. They were seated in one of those private booths with curtains and rice paper and wood walls.

"I'm just not ready for the type of commitment our relationship needs at this point, Owen."

"What do you mean? We only see each other once or twice a week."

"I know, but even when we are together I'm thinking about work. My new role has been such a challenge, I never understood the responsibility that being a team leader brought with it."

"Are you sure there isn't someone else? We haven't had sex much lately."

"Christ, Owen, that's always the way with men, isn't it? If I don't want to jump into bed with you every friggin' minute it has to be because I'm seeing someone else. Well let me tell you, mister, you had better move into the twenty-first

century. Women are no longer just blow-up dolls waiting at home to pleasure you. I'm tired after a hard day at the office, get it? I work hard, and most nights sex is honestly the last thing on my mind."

"Sorry, I'm sorry, Allison." Owen looked down at the limp hand roll on his plate, "I do understand. A single mom who worked two jobs raised me, I know about the challenges." He looked up at her again; a tear glittered in the corner of his eye. "I didn't mean to be insensitive."

They ate the rest of their sushi in silence and when they left the restaurant, Allison gave Owen a kiss on the cheek and said, "I'll call you when things slow down, I mean it."

Owen nodded and walked towards the subway, Allison hailed a cab.

The truth was Owen cut into her time. While asleep she needed a full eight hours every night to spend with the man, and Owen always wanted to snuggle or something. Weekends she wandered the city hoping to run into the man in some neighbourhood, or sitting in a park, she couldn't go kite flying or on a picnic or some stupid thing Owen thought was romantic, but was really just a big bore.

Of course she had visited as many Starbucks as she could find in the city. She took long naps hoping the man would come to her as he did at night, but he never did. Every morning when she woke up from her time with him she wished she was still asleep, but then her mind would kick back into strategy mode, where could she look today, where had she missed?

"God, Allison, you've lost so much weight." Janey was in line ahead of her in Starbucks. "But you look good." Janey didn't sound convinced.

Allison knew she had lost weight; it was all the walking, all the skipped lunches. Every morning she put on a belt pulling it tighter, until today she had reached the final

notch. But that was all right, men loved skinny women. Some women would kill to lose three dress sizes without really trying, Janey was just jealous.

"Thanks."

"So how are things on digital?"

Oh God, was Janey angling for a position on her team? Really wanted out of Depends, huh. Well, Allison was not in a mood for office politics in line at Starbucks. She couldn't be distracted, not even for a minute.

"Great. And Depends?"

"Well, I might be moving."

Allison nodded, then the barista called out Janey's order. Janey waved to Allison as she walked away, Allison ignored her. The barista punched in Allison's order, and then looking at her said, "Oh, have you been sick?"

Allison snapped back to attention. "What?"

The barista became confused. "Oh, um, it's just you're a little pale, and you've gotten a lot thinner, that's all. I thought maybe you'd had the flu."

"I'm fine," Allison said, fixing the girl with a steely stare. She kept her change and didn't put it in the tip jar the way she usually did.

That night was the first time her dreams of the man turned ugly. He pinned her down, she couldn't move, she couldn't scream. She tried as hard as she could, but it was as if her jaw was wired shut and she struggled to pull it apart, her heart hammering, her cries coming out like faraway puffs of breath.

She woke up trembling. It was that damn Janey and the barista, saying she was too thin, that she looked sick. Women were so jealous when other women lost the weight they couldn't, improved themselves, were in love. She hated women.

Finally she fell back to sleep. This time she dreamt that she was in a pink and black tiled bathroom, like something

out of a nineteen-fifties bungalow. There was even a cotton-candy-coloured fluffy bath mat under her feet. Allison sat on the toilet and looked down. She held a pregnancy test with a blue cross in the little paper window. She *was* pregnant after all, she had known it all along. No wonder she looked so strange, so pale and had dark circles under her eyes. Sometimes women lost weight in the first trimester—that was why she was so thin. It came to her that this was the man's child and she had no idea where he was. How could she raise a baby on her own? She had to find the father. She wouldn't be able to work, everyone knew that you had to be at home with your baby or else they would be neurotic, or serial killers. Allison started to cry, she had to find the baby's father, she had to make him see that this was his responsibility, that there was no pleasure without responsibility.

The morning light hit Allison full in the face. She was going to be late again. Her pre-work lingerings at Starbucks had made her late more days than she liked to think about. What a strange dream, about being pregnant. Allison snorted, it had to be because Owen had been giving her his sob story about his single mother the other night. She dressed, giving up on a belt and using the silk sash from her bathrobe. She put on more rouge than usual, trying to make herself less pale. Before she left the bathroom she glanced into her waste-paper basket—there, sticking up from the tissues, what was that white thing? But it was only a Q-tip, nothing more. Finally she put on her red shoes. They had been resoled twice now. And the suede was due for another cleaning, but that was for tomorrow, today she had to get into the office. Hopefully no one had noticed.

After lunch which Allison spent riding the elevators in the building next door, she had a meeting with her boss, Sarah. She supposed it was to do with her being late yet again.

Allison quickly came up with a family-crisis story, mother, sick, lonely, calling and keeping her on the phone much too long, they were putting her in a home, etc. Of course Allison's mother lived in Boca Raton, and had married her senior center's golf pro, but no one knew that.

Sarah had Allison sit down in a chair across from her desk and closed the door behind her. Sarah was a new hire, so Allison wasn't sure about her, but she knew no one could resist a mother crisis story.

Allison looked up at the kitten poster with the little white cat hanging from a branch behind Sarah's desk. Pink letters spelled out *Hang in There* in a bubble above the cat's head. Allison wondered if it was hipster ironic, or if Sarah just had excruciatingly bad taste. There were bobble heads lined up along the front of her desk, and a standee of Justin Bieber in the corner. Bad taste, Allison decided.

"Allison," Sarah said warmly, "how are you?"

"Sarah, just let me start by saying that I am so sorry that I was late this morning. It's my . . . " but Sarah cut her off.

"I didn't even know you were late today, no need to apologize."

Allison relaxed, sat back in her chair. Already her mind started racing to her after work plans, she wanted to start in the suburbs. Olive Garden? Too plebeian for The Man?

"Allison, we've been a bit worried about you."

Allison looked at Sarah and smiled, she had no idea what this woman was talking about.

"You are just not bringing your usual energy to the table these days, not generating the kind of excitement we like to pride ourselves on offering our clients."

Allison was speechless, she shifted in her chair.

"Now, we really value your contributions, your team spirit has always been part of what makes our company great. However, the thinking is that we need someone who has a fresh perspective as our digital leader. Janey Joon has some really innovative ideas . . . "

“Excuse me?” Allison said sitting forward. “Janey?”

Sarah put on a pair of reading glasses and shuffled through some papers on her desk. “Yes, Janey Joon. She has some wonderful ideas about building advertising opportunities through social media, such as Facebook and Twitter.” Sarah looked up at Allison and smiled.

“What? That’s all social media is, one big advertisement. Leveraging advertising possibilities is such bullshit, the sites are all saturated, everyone knows that. No one even notices the stupid ads on those sites anymore.”

Sarah took her glasses off, the smile was gone. “Allison, I’m sorry, but Janey . . . ”

Allison stood up. “You just think it’s some fresh, innovative idea because she’s Chinese!”

There was silence for a minute. Sarah looked up at Allison.

“Please sit down, Allison. Janey is Korean, not Chinese.”

Allison sat, she was crying now.

“Allison, we have an opening on the Cup o’ Noodles team, a little less pressure, a little . . . ”

Allison just shook her head no, she reached blindly for a Kleenex off of Sarah’s desk and ended up knocking over a few bobble heads.

“Maybe you should take the rest of the day off, Allison.” Sarah was standing up, coming around the desk. Oh God, was she going to hug her? “In fact, why don’t you take the rest of the week off, think about it? We can talk on Monday.”

Without saying a word Allison stood up and headed blindly for the door, as she flung it open the toe of her shoe caught in the rug and she stumbled. Sarah reached out to help her, but Allison fled, grabbing her purse off her desk and heading for the elevators.

In the elevator, Allison patted her face dry with tissues dug from deep in her bag.

Well, if they thought they were going to demote her or something they were fucking wrong. She would sue their ass for mental cruelty. It was obvious that Allison was not doing

well, she was thin and pale. She wondered briefly if she could get a psychiatrist to write her a note. And after she sued them, she would get a better job and they could suck it.

It was this stupid obsession with a guy she had seen once. Okay, the dreams were compelling, they were very real, but they were dreams. Her career was real, especially if she was going to have a baby.

When the elevator got to the ground floor she turned automatically towards the Starbucks. No, she wouldn't go in. He wasn't there, he wasn't anywhere. He probably lived in a different province, a different country. She stopped just outside Starbucks' glass doors and took off the red shoes. She stuffed them in the garbage can placed there for disposal of coffee cups and plastic wrap. Those shoes weren't sexy anymore, they were a disaster. Barefoot she straightened up and turned towards the subway, she'd buy some shoes at Nine West or something before she got on.

Someone brushed against her arm. She looked up, it was the man, she knew those eyes. Night after night they had looked into hers while they made love. He winked at her and smiled. Before she could move, he was weaving his way through the crowd, his white shirt and black suspenders standing out like a beacon. She began to run after him, but it seemed as if he was always just ahead, leading her on. She screamed Stop, and people turned to look, but he didn't, he just kept walking away.

She made it home somehow, still barefoot. She had never caught up with him, at the subway entrance he had seemed to vanish.

In the kitchen she put the last half cup of kibble in the cat's dish. I'll have to get more tomorrow, she thought.

She closed the door of her bedroom behind her. Carefully she took off her clothes, folded them into a neat pile on the

chair and lay down naked on the bed. He'll come to me, he must. She lay there and waited for him.

She was still waiting for him three weeks later when they broke down the door of her apartment. They had to step over the emaciated body of a dead cat to get in the apartment, but the real smell was coming from the bedroom.

Starved herself to death, the policeman who found her said, shaking his head in disgust, only twenty-five, what a waste. The real mystery though was the meaning of the filthy red suede shoes nailed to the bedroom door with a kind of nail seldom seen anymore, hand forged with a square head, the type used a hundred years ago or so.

She must have been really nuts, the policeman said as the EMTs carried the body out zipped into a black bag, you'd think someone would have noticed.

After the family had cleared out her belongings, leaving the shoes behind, the landlord threw them in the dumpster behind the building. There they sat sinking deeper and deeper in the dark recess under the weight of other people's garbage until they could no longer be seen below the detritus of everyday life.

The Love of the Emperor Is Divine

Tom Cardamone

In vino sanitas
—**Pliny the Elder**

Loyal Publius,

The love of the Emperor is Divine.

So said one of my eunuch procurers to the last little tasty morsel shoved into my chambers. At least this one had been bathed. His tidy tunic was loose; no doubt he'd been thoroughly searched by the Praetorian Guards. Emperors fear assassins the way rabble fear indigestion; eventually one's guts are stabbed. As you have dutifully reminded me before, I am nearly the oldest emperor to wear the Purple. Real danger is a slippery set of stairs. If the daggers come, so be it, as long as I don't have to appear before the Senate again and accept their marbled accolades, beneficial poems, and painted statues that portray me as stronger than I have ever been in my life, more resolute and of sounder character than I'd actually care to be—a modern Seneca. Lo! If I live any longer they'll carve statues of me riding chariots drawn by eagles while farting out golden apples of wisdom. Ridiculous. I want strong wine. I want Her Most Rotund Royal Highness to keep to her wing of the palace, and the occasional kiss from a sweet boy. The right kiss and I think of Decimus, and our carefree schooldays in Greece. Do you remember him? I've no idea of his fate.

I am told by mutual acquaintances that you appear withdrawn and depressed since your banishment to Naples.

Well done. The more solitary and disgruntled you appear, the more likely you will draw sour serpents from their nests. How the discontent love to compare wounds, squeezing out verbal pus to smear on one another's lips and compare the pungent taste. Pay attention to the wives of the summering senators, especially old ones with patrician blood. Boredom loosens tongues and they know their wealthy fathers' business as well as their husbands', so there's double bounty to be had.

I know your accommodations are among the most superior along the coast as my uncle's freedman once owned the very villa; who knew that rascal would flourish so financially once the yoke was lifted? His daughters are still whores, however. You can only polish rotten fruit so much. I expect you to start complaining in earnest by autumn. No doubt a suitable crisis, real or imagined, will present itself and you will be recalled. Until then, please pout and do not share the case of Narbonne wine that accompanies this missive. Importantly, when you decant, save, and reuse the corks; I went to a lot of trouble to have them treated to maintain aroma and keep the wine from turning.

Report only salacious gossip and rumors of plot. I have no need for compliments. I am old and my reign will be brief. The empire is between wars. Our borders have grown and shrunk, expanded and withdrawn, an empire out of breath, an exhausted puffer fish caught in the net of history. Tired of assassinations, rattled by plague, with new religions racing up our backside like a mad rash, the Senate has hoisted this diadem upon my withered brow precisely because I look as worn out at the world feels.

Burn this letter and do not copy your reply. Our discretion maddens my secretaries with fears of conspiracies, and I do like to keep these eunuchs guessing.

Your Most Appreciative Emperor

Loyal Publius,

How does the clipping of testicles pull nostrils skyward? I've rarely seen a mincing eunuch who didn't throw his nose up in the air at any task. The one who brings me my boys does so as if delivering dirty linen to the laundry. Think how past emperors would have had him crucified, or worse. But I've decided my short reign will be a peaceful one. My singular goal is to adopt the right heir, to find a bright young philosopher with a democratic soul to return republican principles to Rome. I am powerless in the present yet the whim of succession shapes the world! And lo, the princes and knights that leave their wives in my presence, thinking to divorce their way to the throne! Uglier are the ones who bring their ephebes around, the blond wisp of a beard tickling their curious and noble chins.

The poets of this age are humorless, or at least in this city. If you find a wit on your end of the world, send him my way, please. I'll stand him dinner every night of the year for the chance to utter an unexpected laugh. These evenings of stale theater and watered-down wine will be the end of me. A novel idea: assassination through boredom. Nero tried it on the world, perhaps the world now exacts its revenge regardless who occupies the throne?

Your last letter was interesting. You speak of recent dreams of Decimus? That you have nighttime visitations from one so fair speaks that the sap still runs through your veins. I envy you, it now takes greater effort on my part to summon what used to flow so freely. Later this month a party of senators from Hispania Ulterior will decamp from Rome and borrow Bassianus's estate. Get invited to one of their evenings of frivolity; I hear they're quite bawdy and would like a firsthand report. Your last letter was interesting but hard to read. I've enclosed my favorite ink and will have more sent; I find it thicker and less blotchy than what the imperial stores provide. Ignore the red tint when first brushed on papyrus, it dries to an ebony hue.

Again, burn this letter and do not copy your reply. I don't want future ages studying our drivel and gossip as if it were sagely advice the way scholars sort poor Claudius's material.
Your Most Jealous Emperor

Loyal Publius,

The feverish weather oppressing Rome makes your seaside villa more appealing than ever before. Half the city wants for banishment as luxurious as yours! Thank you for the complete works of Claudius, they've only just arrived and are as musty and droll as your wit. Next time you are at the market look among the latest coins for my image on the new sestertius. My likeness is that of a crone. Even the laurels look withered. I blame this heat.

I approve of your lonely walks on the beach in the morning. This invites approach. No chance of being overheard. Wise move. Make sure your sandy march takes you past that churlish old equestrian Ligus's tiny villa. He's an early riser and blames me for the increase in last year's grain tax.

No, I do not remember Decimus as anything more than a harmless plaything. And playthings do not cry blood when they embrace you. Don't blame the Narbonne for your bad dreams, my friend. This comes with old age. Unspent lust piles up and pours back out under the crack of whatever nocturnal door it was secured behind. These carnal thoughts never die, but ferment into an ugliness that requires the company of youth. Buy some young, choice slave. Treat him unjustly and you'll sleep deeply and soundly, like the babe you just spoiled.

Ah, but this heat makes me desire of sleep.

Your Most Exhausted Emperor

Loyal Publius,

I'm glad you have heartily renewed your approval of the wine, more is on the way. Your description of the Hispania

party was exact; I daresay our scribes at the courts could use a lesson from you! I have a small favor to ask. I've included a scroll I need discreetly returned to Proconsul Gnaeus's library. It's fragile and dusty as he collects the works of obscure Stoic philosophers. Return the scroll to his household upon receipt of this missive, before the Hispania party departs. Inquire if the proconsul or any guests are summering there. Try to appear as if you're begging for a dinner invitation and explain that you borrowed the scroll summer before last. Gnaeus is currently touring Gallia to wean his son off a rather serious predilection for Roman harlots, and I would like to ascertain if he indeed lent his house out and if so to whom. Our spies have information that the Hispania senators are in Naples for a clandestine meeting with unknown parties. Have no fear, you were at his house two summers ago and he pleaded with you to borrow this particular text, so cover is provided—Gods, the eyes of these imperial agents are everywhere! They even have record of that trip to the Isle of Rhodes we took while still so young. Also recorded, the name of the girl you abandoned me there for, as well as her height, hair color, and even a general appraisal of her teeth! I learned a lot, puttering around the ruins of old Tiberius's playhouse, though I'm sure you learned more when you finally caught up with her in the port of Misenum. Yes, that's recorded in the imperial records as well, and so too are some of the gymnastics the two of you tried out in bed. It's both thrilling and startling to think we had caught the eye of empire at that age. No word on Decimus in any of these scrolls, however, as if the spies and secretaries knew he'd come to naught.

Concerning your stated worry over the recent arrests and reassignments among the Praetorian Guard: don't try to make sense of it because it doesn't make any sense. I find it valuable to throw a little chaos at our military minds, they cannot comprehend anything that doesn't fit their chessboard vision of order and armor, so they read endless

meaning into the occasional, random execution. If they're looking over their shoulder, then they're not looking for the throne.

No word of Decimus? Somnus denies your trysts?

Your Most Nostalgic Emperor

Loyal Publius,

I've started composing my letters to you late at night. The air is still hot but there are no supplicants, slaves, or aggrieved citizens in the halls; their bustle and complaint agitates the very temperature of Rome. Did you know that during summers past the Emperor Domitian had ice hauled down from the Alps? Nerva put a stop to that and I concur, nothing incites a rabble so much as obscene luxury in the face of their suffering. I find myself obsessed with past rulers, and sympathetic toward those I had once considered vile. I was drafted into this lonely collegium and am now on the inside looking out, a prisoner of lisping litigants and petitioners weeping over the border skirmishes of countries I did not previously know were clients of the empire.

Palace life is not as I imagined. I do not rule the world, I merely keep its accounts. I go to bed late and wake up early and in between dream that I am adding my seal to heaps and heaps of documents. Unlike you and your unseemly tussles with Decimus, I never dream of boys or, even more obscenely, the gods as I used to in the days of old. I used to dream in the Roman tongue, then Greek, and now I dream in figures, revenues, taxes, duties. Speaking of duties, it is not news that you report Quintus despises me. Find me the envious, those are the snakes which bite—I don't care about those that only hiss and shake.

I miss the sea air and long to join you. Make an offer to the gods for me, I beseech you. Use the incense I have enclosed. Do not be put off by its powerful fragrance; the scent is designed for otherworldly nostrils. Perhaps it will mollify the monster you claim Decimus has become in your

dreams. I read your last account aloud to one of the eunuchs and he pissed his toga. Lo!

Your Most Nocturnal Emperor

Loyal Publius,

Thank you for your lifetime of friendship and service to the Empire. Your ready advice and willing ear have served my rise and have much benefited the throne. I'm sure by now news of the conspiracy and summary executions has reached you, and I know that everyone, even the favored, fear for their throats at moments like these; I've experienced my own night sweats as the Purple passed from one bearer to another in our eternally uncertain city. Be calm. Keep reading. No daggers are intended for you.

I never told you how I killed my father. It's an interesting story, not fraught with moral drama, nothing remotely Sophoclean about it, really, just pure calculation. I knew early on that I was born to the Purple. Late one night as a small child I woke from my crib, without a cry or a start, and looked out the window to see lightning but I heard no thunder. It was a marvelous vein of gold; though it lingered in the sky for only a moment, it was forever burned into my mind. I knew it was the whip of Jove goading me on toward my fate.

From youth I understood that my family's station exacerbated the situation, that if I reached for the throne, it would be denied. I would have to wait until it was offered. Father was my sole obstacle. I know you are shocked to read this, find it unfathomable. Please, have that last glass of Narbonne and know that the tears I shed when we both learned of his death were real. It pained me greatly to remove my progenitor from my path, but the goal was mighty, and his good health and relative youth, as well as his thrifty management of our estates, were my greatest impediments. When he died I inherited all. I quickly sold our vineyards in Gallia at a good price to our neighbors, the

formidable but financially struggling Amlianus family, and their gratitude propelled me into the arms of their oldest, humorless, plumpest daughter. Our marriage was my introduction to the social stratum where I met my second wife, but you are already familiar with these stories. What you never knew was how purposeful our youthful wanderings were to me: when you dabbled in Cypriot whorehouses, I visited the last living tutor of Marcus Aurelius. You should have stayed longer on Rhodes, Publius, for there my real education began. At a dingy bookstall I stumbled upon the diary of Tiberius's eunuch procurer. I devoured the secrets within. Aside from the devious acts he committed on behalf of the mad emperor, and the frightful errands he ran for other members of the twisted Julian line, he rather offhandedly recorded how he gathered the components of an ancient Sumerian spell the Emperor's mother, the inimitable Livia Drusilla, utilized to exert control from behind the throne.

Your role in uncovering the conspiracy against the royal personage was invaluable. The scroll you returned to Gnaeus's estate was quickly found to belong to Bassianus, as I knew his astute personal librarian would examine the document and see the intended inscription. He attempted to deliver it himself, and was arrested by the Praetorian Guards at Bassianus's gates. It was there that the scroll was again reviewed, in full public view of the astonished Hispania party, and shown to contain a secret map of the royal bedroom as well as the schedule of my guards. Word travels fast. Bassianus opened his wrists before the guards could remove him from his modest mansion on the Aventine Hill. The trial for the Hispania conspirators will be a quick one. The confiscation of their estates will go a long way toward satiating the ravenous imperial budget (Narbonne is not cheap, my friend).

I have always hated Gnaeus.

But what of Father? On his birthday, I sent him the same rare ink you have been using yourself. On Lupercalia I sent him wine of moderate expense, infused with the same herbs I had sprinkled into yours. I had the household slaves burn the required incense in his presence. The dust you inhaled from the Bassianus scroll was of the same substance mixed into the powder my mother brushed her cheeks with, the cheeks he dutifully kissed every morning before inspecting the farm. These ingredients, when delivered in the right order, serve as an aphrodisiac for my alphabetic demon. Oh I've sent him everywhere! Britannia. Cyrenaica. A fitting way to dismiss those whose service is no longer required. The elements needed to distill Dispaters' ink require the resources of an Empire to draw upon, yet another reason to assume the Purple. My minion travels flat on the page, painted black letters that only rise when summoned. Summoned by your poisoned breath, Publius. I've only seen this dark rising once, when I perfected the process on unsuspecting Decimus. He's the only soul to ever read one of my poor attempts at poetry. He must have thought it my attempt to win his favor—when he clearly favored you. To mock me, the creature now takes his form, or the shadow of a nightmare there of. Or so I am told. I do not dream of Decimus. He refuses me still. And so I sent him to you.

Watch the ink, slippery as an eel, thin as a knife blade, black as a sibyl's cunnus, leap from the papyrus and take form. It pulled Decimus's lips apart and forced its way down his throat. The thing will worm its way through your innards, until it reaches your mind, your heart—to leave you stricken as if by apoplexy.

I can imagine the discomfort you are feeling now. It's not the effect of nerves or wine that makes the page shimmer so—the ink is reaching for you now. This is one letter you needn't burn. As the words rise from the page the parchment turns to ash.

Your sacrifice immeasurably improves the Empire. When word reaches Rome of your demise, I won't be alone in being distraught. The panegyrics I will commission on your behalf will be a rallying point for the citizenry to put this horrid assassination plot behind us. I'll erect a statue of your likeness in the very Senate we both so despise. You will stand there forever, a pale immortal. Seashells will adorn the base, symbolizing your philosophical, ruminative nature, your oceanic wisdom. Upon viewing this marble masterpiece, the masses will all exclaim a singular sentiment—

The love of the Emperor is Divine.

Please Do Me: An Oral History

Nick Mamatas

Sasha Kambayashi—vocalist, Trouble in the Treble Clef

The whole scene was extremely sexual. Of course, every scene is extremely sexual. I'm sure model-train fancier get-togethers feature nightly orgies. But the chordgaze scene was especially extremely sexual. TTC was, except for about six months, an all-woman line-up, and when the bloggers would write afterwards that "the whole room smelled like pussy" they weren't being sexist, or complimentary. It was just a fact. We got so wet up on stage, playing. I think it has to do with the reintroduction of the guitar and live playing into EDM.

Anyway, guitars mean a backline and a backline means a road crew. We were all just kids with laptops who had played too much *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. TTC especially, we just wanted something real between our legs, hanging off our necks. Enter Gustafson! We found him the old-fashioned way. Not even Craigslist, or the *Village Voice* classifieds. I hung flyers around Hillside Avenue like an asshole, like I was waiting for something to happen just by putting myself out there in public. We did the Book Your Own Fuckin' Life thing, but we needed some support for the tour.

What I liked most about Gustafson is that he wasn't even all that much to look at. I mean, if I were to describe him to you, you'd probably imagine a blond-haired Danny DeVito. He was a little fireplug of a guy, thick limbed. Thick cock too. The girth was almost pathological. But there was just

something about him. He always knew what to say, and he knew when, and when not, to touch me.

Stan Alene—bass, Yahtzee Chainsaw Massacre

Gus was the glue that held together the scene. A roadie. He knew everyone. All the hot spots. He could find a vegan restaurant in Wilkes-Barre, PA, at three in the morning. I was impressed that he knew to pronounce the name of the town: “wilkes berry.”

You know, usually it’s journalists. They create a movement out of nothing. They get the blogosphere going. Then ten years later they write a book about how great everything was. Isn’t this for one of those books? One of those parasitical books?

Gus was key to it all. He got us on the road. He was more than just a roadie; he was a tour manager, a muse. He did this thing with his teeth and gums. It was like human beatboxing, but it didn’t sound human. *Inhuman* beatboxing.

[makes noises with his mouth]

Yeah, I can’t do it. He could do beats and bass drops with his mouth, at the same time, and chord changes.

He could do a lot of things.

Bret Rothschild—vocalist, rhythm guitar; The Inbred Rotshchilds

What I especially loved about Gustafson was his ability to engulf my member entirely, and to tickle my scrotum with the tip of his tongue. It was like a party trick. It was really something else. I would have had him along even if he couldn’t tune a guitar. He was also very good at that.

Tammy Fuentes—Tuningfork.com reporter

One time I was at DeepFend One, backstage, and I saw this huge flat ass. Like two giant beans. Pants down, and they were just flapping away while Gustafson boned the

bass player of some forgotten band up the ass. Yeah, bass players are girls, that's the cliché. I think this one was of trans* experience. Presented as a dude, scraggly beard and all. A dude, I should say. Transdudes are dudes.

Bisexuality is rock's oldest play. Of course, when you think of Bowie and Jagger in bed together, it's cool. Two androgynes—you can't help but picture them hairless with flat plastic Ken Doll crotches. They didn't have sex, they just linked their chakras somehow. But a fat little dude and whoever it was being ass-fucked and grunting like a pig, you don't see that sort of thing. It was real. Authentic.

Charlene Downer—keyboards, Superconducting Nanomachine and Trouble in the Treble Clef

He wasn't around for my time in TTC. But later, when I joined Superconducting Nanomachine as the live mixer and drum programmer, Gustafson was our roadie. He had breasts. By which I mean he had protruding, fatty pectorals and would occasionally lactate. He could lactate on command. You've likely heard the Tumblr rumors, but I'd never seen Sasha do it. She did have a lot of throat problems when I was touring with TTC though, and she would complain, by texting me from the other end of the tour bus, that she never used to go hoarse when Gus was the roadie. Make of that what you will.

Cade Ellis—guitar, Flatlander

Was there anyone this guy wouldn't fuck? I never used him, never needed him. I'm a laptop and three-legged stool guy. But I'd seen him around, on the festival circuit, or when I was supporting a larger band.

Not better, larger. As in every member playing a single instrument. Those bands. Lots of hangers-on in those bands.

As far as I can tell the answer to my own question is, "No, with a but."

It was like something straight out of Internet pornography. A chubby man on a couch, a too-thin too-young girl straddling him and riding him reverse-cowgirl style. Her legs were splayed open, her sex bald save for some stubble. There was no camera about, but she was on display as if the scene were being recorded. She didn't mind at all when I walked in; her O-face betrayed no discomfort.

She squatted and lifted herself off his member. He wasn't anything special. His balls weren't shaved. He was all mossy and blond. The girl, who wasn't in any of the bands, but who I think worked the festival in some capacity, was fairly dexterous. She stood on the couch, her ass to Gustafson's face, and moved one leg behind her, then spun around and replanted herself on his cock. She rode him for maybe three seconds, then something happened. She looked into his eyes and shivered, and then he burst into tears.

Gustafson did. He burst into tears, she did not. She had a strange look on her face, an alienated smile if that makes sense. I got the sense that she was enjoying herself immensely, just like a girl in pornography, and then she saw something in his eyes that upset her, but just a little bit. Who knows? His mouth was open; perhaps she spotted a dental cavity on one of his pre-molars and that unnerved her for a moment. But whatever it was, he was more upset by it than she. He burst into tears, planted his palms onto her small breasts, and pushed her right to the floor. She shouted at him, and cursed, and when she picked herself up tried to kick him in the testicles. She missed and hit his thigh. He howled even louder, like a wolf, or like a man whose last friend had just died and last dollar had just been burnt to cinders. Then she finally saw me, snatched up the puddle of her clothes, and stormed off as she hopped into her shorts.

If there was nobody Gustafson wouldn't fuck on the road, there's at least one woman he wouldn't ejaculate into.

I grabbed a bagel and a cup of yogurt from the green room fridge and took it outside. I couldn't bear the thought

of eating with that fat little freak on the couch, bawling his eyes out.

Fuentes

Chordgaze was the first real rock, as opposed to hip-hop, scene to come out of Queens in a long time. All the musicians were pushed out the Village in the 1990s, and out of Brooklyn in the 2000s. At the same time, you had these kids from Long Island heading west, into the city, to play gigs. They met in the middle—the Brooklynites with their lineage of shoegaze and house and EDM, and the Island kids with their guitars and metal and prog-rock influences.

Gustafson wasn't from Long Island, but he was of Long Island. He'd gone to school someplace—either Hofstra or Stony Brook—and like a lot of guys in the 2010s, he couldn't find work after graduating. Originally he was from Minnesota, which makes sense given the name and given his ability to navigate an intensely local music scene.

So he was one of those guys who hung stayed in town after school, taking advantage of relatively cheap rents and cultural opportunities. He was a smart guy, with a strong back, and he knew the schools—the college radio stations, the on-campus performance venues, the various scenesters and tummlers. So he brought the Long Island kids, a bunch of half-Italian half-Jewish kids with Zeppelin tattoos, into the city. And they met the fancy trustafarian Brooklynites whose parents weren't quite so generous as others of their cohort, and it was love at first sight.

Jamaica has both a Long Island Rail Road hub and plenty of subways. The train to JFK runs out of there as well. And it had some fairly cheap warehouse spaces, for both practice and performance. The perfect storm for a new sound, and for gentrification.

Gus got paid in ass and pussy, I think that much is clear. His motivation, I have no idea what it was.

Kambayashi

I am pretty eager to please, I suppose. A lot of guys, before I was in the band, would use PUA tactics—"Sasha? Like Sasha Grey? I bet you can't suck a dick like . . ." And those were the guys who decided against trying some racist joke instead.

Of course it never worked! That's why PUA guys have all the time in the world to blog about seduction strategies. If they had girlfriends, they'd be too busy. Hell, if they ever got laid, they'd be too busy.

But with Gustafson, I could, you know, do it. Total deep throat. He said he liked turning my mouth into a face-pussy. Even saying it now, it sounds gross. I shudder to see it in print. But he was all encouragement; it was like he was a coach and I was trying to run a marathon. That was one of his tricks. He was always smiling, always nodding and stroking my cheek when we were together, and I fell for it.

Maybe trick [*makes air quotes*] is the wrong word. He was authentic. And I enjoyed being the focus of his attention. There was a real trick though. When sucking him off, or really, when my head was hanging off the side of a bed or couch and he was fucking my mouth, I'd slip my thumbs between my pointer and middle fingers and squeeze. Sometimes just the left, sometimes both. Gustafson told me it was an old dentist's trick, for patients with very sensitive gag reflexes. It really worked. I don't bother going that deep with anyone else, so I don't use it anymore, but if anyone out there finds it helpful, enjoy!

Rothschild

I didn't, but I would have. I actually only had one in-depth conversation with Gustafson. Maybe I wasn't his type. I don't think he had any real friends. Tons of acquaintances, many many partners, but all his energy was put into the scene. Chordgaze was his friend.

He had a charisma about him. If he reminded me of anyone, it was Stephen King. I know that sounds strange, but King is very good at putting a hand on your shoulder, as a reader, mind you, and whispering in your ear, “This is going to be very frightening, but also exciting.”

Ben Davidson—vocalist, keys; Occupy Davidson

Gus used to hum and scat as he worked. I remember that my drummer once said to Gus, “Wow, you must really be into *Tetris*.” [*laughs*] It wasn’t the *Tetris* song, of course, but I did know it. I owned it, on vinyl, thanks to my grandfather’s record collection. It was a dance record. It wasn’t very old, it wasn’t a 78 or anything, but old enough and obscure. I sold it and bought a Wandre guitar with the proceeds, so that should tell you how obscure the record was.

The song Gustafson kept scatting to himself is called “The Return of Mister Hotsy-Totsy.” It was by a quintet, the Muller Fast Five. It was an integrated band, which I believe was unusual at the time. The biggest stars could get away with having a guest black player, or white player, on a record, and naturally the guys all jammed together after hours, but this was a touring ensemble. Benny Goodman had an integrated swing band in the 1930s, but he was a huge name, and swing music was very popular. Muller wasn’t white, he was black, and the white players followed his lead. It was his band, and they did weird little dance numbers, not in the swing idiom. I guess they did sound a little like eight-bit videogame music. So they went nowhere. As far as I can tell, and I looked, “The Return of Mister Hotsy-Totsy” is the only record they ever put out, and except for Gustafson I’ve never met anyone who knew the song.

Downer

No, he didn’t fuck me. I didn’t fuck him. We fucked. A few times. He used to say, “We’re in this together, baby, like the seventies.” He was just a funny guy. I guess he did

proposition everyone he met, and he met a lot of people when chordgaze was happening, of course.

Most roadies get laid a lot on the road. Or they get free blowjobs at least. If some kid wants backstage to fuck the lead singer or to do a line of coke with a real-live rock star, they have to suck some sweaty roadie dick first. Roadies are like trolls under the bridge, collecting tolls from the billy goats gruff.

Gus was different. He just fucked the bands. Or we all fucked together, and he was a conduit. Scenes can be incestuous, literally. [*laughs*] It's easy to end up in bed with your bandmates, or your scenemates. It tends to ruin bands and ruin scenes too. We're all potential Yoko Onos, in our way. So Gus was a way to get close to other people without actually having sex with them. It was like we passed him around, while he put each of us on his lap in turn for a few seconds. A little like Santa Claus, I suppose.

Fuentes

Supposedly, he was born in 1968, but he was born overseas and so I've not been able to find official birth records. Just like Obama! [*laughs*]

Alene

No. We did have threesomes together, but our swords never crossed. It wasn't a homophobic thing; we had all-dude threesomes at least twice. I just didn't want to fuck him is all. And he didn't want to fuck me. That's how he was. He never got turned down, because he somehow knew only to ask people who'd say yes.

I didn't want to fuck him because I used to have dreams about him a lot. I'd have an anxiety dream, like the one about the math final for the calculus class you forgot you were ever enrolled in, and he'd walk in next to me and let me crib off his test. Or the dream when you're on a suspension bridge and the cables are snapping, and then a

light flares and you look down at a tugboat, and there's Gus, bidding you to jump. And I jump, and then wake up.

He was comforting in my dreams. Honestly, the dreams were half the reason I quit my day job. I wanted to tour, and I wanted him there with me. I couldn't imagine inviting him to my apartment for a beer or anything; it's like inviting the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade into your apartment. That's why I launched the Chordgasm Tour with Team Socket, The Book of Exalted Deeds, and Humdinger. Thirty dates in thirty-two days. It was a total *Get in the Van* sort of thing. Nineteen people in two vans.

For the first week, Gus drove our van. He could drive eighteen hours straight without blinking. He'd hum that strange song while scrubbing away all the splattered bugs from the windshields during pit stops. A week in, he put himself in the back of the van, nestled himself on top of all the McDonald's wrappers and plastic water bottles, nudged his hips out of his pants and said that it was someone else's turn to drive. I don't know how to drive, so I got to see a lot of Gus, and a lot of Bob and Emily and Ahmed. Emily drove a lot during the day, though she didn't have very good night vision so she'd take the post-gig shift with Gus in the back. We'd just fuck and fuck, all of us except for whoever was driving. I hadn't come twice, three times a day, since I was twelve and had just discovered jerking off. My penis ended up chafed. I had specks of blood in my boxers.

The gigs themselves . . . well. Chordgaze, as a genre, isn't known for technical virtuosity or live playing, and we couldn't afford an Amon Tobin-style spectacular video-projection show, or even laser lights. And it's not like chordgaze had much hold on, you know, the red states. We even went to Alabama, to a Holiday Inn. They had a band night!

But the kids liked us. They liked the Chordgasm tour. One time they surrounded the vans and started rocking them after a gig. They weren't violent or crazy; they weren't

slamming their fists on the doors and throwing themselves at the windows to get a look in, it was like they were working together to rock a pair of giant cradles. We sat in the van, gently swaying, and kissing. All of us, trading kisses from lips to lips. It was very nice, sweet.

Ellis

I did a summer at the Mercury Lounge last year. Every Wednesday night, from May Day till Labor Day. Chordgaze is already nostalgia—*Say, remember the twenty-teens?* says the interstitial ad whenever I try to read the *Times* online—but a gig's a gig and I live around the corner, so.

Gus came to the show once. Honestly, the August gigs were not well attended. I had a guarantee, so honestly I didn't care so much, and the Mercury is so tiny and the summers so hot I wouldn't have shown up if I didn't need the money to eat.

There were a dozen people there for the gig, and the bartenders. Or maybe that included the bartenders. It's not like they had much else to do. The ice was melting in people's glasses between sips. About halfway through the set Gus walks in. He wasn't untoward or anything, but he did just stand and stare at me. He didn't sway, he didn't get a drink, he just watched.

I'm not even sure he was listening. He was just looking at me.

Yeah, he looked the same. He was still big, but hadn't gotten any fatter. No more gray in his hair than usual. Like I said, the Lounge is a small venue. It had been six years and the guy was still a roadie as far as I'd heard. He'd hooked up with some J-metal bands.

Gus didn't say a thing to me afterwards, but he did keep standing there as I packed up my gear. It was a bit embarrassing, to have to deal with my own backline, small as it is. I felt as though he had just come to judge me, rather than to listen to my music.

No, I don't think he created, or midwived, or whatever you want to call it, chordgaze. He was just a guy who was always DTF and who could plug in a few guitars without getting everyone on stage electrocuted. How is that different than any other roadie? Don't believe for a second that he only had sex with musicians in the scene. I saw otherwise with my own eyes. I didn't see if he went home with anyone that night. After rolling some cables, I looked up and he was gone.

Davidson

I recorded a version of "The Return of Mister Hotsy-Totsy" and made it a B-side on this retro forty-five I did. We pressed about three hundred copies, and wouldn't you know, as if by magic, we got a letter from Muller's granddaughter. Granddaughter and lawyer. The guy was still alive, and somehow, from an old-age home in Oklahoma City, he caught wind of our cover version, and he wanted money. We went through all the usual stuff with a mechanical reproduction license, so we didn't owe him very much, but apparently there's no talking to him. Literally, we weren't allowed to. Kat Muller was in full-on lawyer-beast mode.

Usually, lawyers go away very quickly once they realize that there's no money in the project. Not this one. She didn't even care about the money. She wanted to know where I'd heard of the song, if I had a copy of the original—I didn't anymore as I mentioned earlier—and then she wanted the name and address of the person I sold it to. Which struck me as creepy and unethical. She was desperate enough to start offering me money for the information.

Of course I gave it to her. I mean, I contacted the buyer first, told him the story, and then split the money with him. He was happy to be harassed by her for a few weeks for five thousand bucks, and I was pleased to be rid of her. So all in all "The Return of Mister Hotsy-Totsy" was the most remunerative record Occupy Davidson ever released.

Rock star!

Rothschild

Gus was our roadie on a college tour of New England. This was to be our last tour. It's so much easier just to Skype these days. He was quite upset about the idea, and made no bones about telling us that live music was a necessity for his life, even if it wasn't one for ours.

He was as professional, and as libidinous, as ever, of course, when it came to both giving and receiving. I tried to reach out to him after the tour, but he never responded to my texts, returned my calls, answered my emails, or came to any of the parties I invited him to. I tried to find him at his apartment, but he either wasn't in whenever I rang, or was hiding from me. I spent a week casing out his building from the deli across the street, but didn't see a thing. I did notice that he never received any mail, not even flyers or other junk mail. But I'm sure he lived in that building. I'd been to the apartment before, and I asked his neighbors, and they all said that they saw him every day in the hallway, or in the basement doing laundry. Even the deli-counter man knew who I was talking about, and supposedly I'd just missed him virtually every day.

Eventually I gave up and went home. Have you seen him? Are you interviewing Gus for this project? Do you have any information on him? I presume someone from the old days is still in contact with him. I'd like to forward him a message if I can.

Fuentes

It's just the sort of dumb rumor we don't get in music anymore. Like Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil at the crossroads, or the previously undiscovered species of lice found in Bob Marley's dreadlocks, or Rod Stewart and the gallon of sperm pumped from his stomach after a backstage collapse. A combination of magic, sex, and weird

science. So, the story goes that Gustafson had some sort of mutation that made him sexually irresistible; his sweat was an aphrodisiac. Or that he was an incubus—a kind of sex vampire—who was empowered by the sexual energy of crowds who love music. He had a couple of Pinterest boards made in his honor, and was a name to drop for a while.

But in the end it's just an overused memetic anecdote, just like Robert Johnson's soul. Any query or review that mentions Robert Johnson selling his soul is an automatic rejection—otherwise we'd be publishing that shit three or four times a week.

Right now, with Gustafson, it's like once a month that we have to roll our eyes and delete "Gustafson the incubus" when someone wants to talk about sexualized beats or hot chord changes in a review, plus the occasional suggestion that we find him and run a "Where is he now?" feature or something. Not that anyone knows where he is.

Leslie Muller—clarinet, Muller Fast Five

Well, it is certainly a remarkable resemblance. [*holds photo to his chest*] May I keep it?

I haven't played in decades. My drummer soldiered on for years later, playing rimshots for jingles and giving music lessons to little kids who wanted to be the next Gene Krupa. He's truly the connection between the old generation and the new, still, though I bet most of the people you're interviewing don't know him at all anymore. I did see that there were some Krupa videos on the YouTube though . . .

No, I don't own a clarinet, even. I don't listen to much music either. My granddaughter got me an iPod, and put a bunch of songs on it, so she says, but I can't figure out for the life of me how to get it past the A's. How often can a fellow listen to "Take the A Train" after all, eh? And that should be under T! What a blunder. It reminds me of old Ed Sullivan, who introduced the song on his show once as "Take a Train." I'll tell you, they let anybody on the television back

then, except for the Muller Fast Five. Integrated band, not doing swing, maybe a little out there for some people. We didn't play in Peoria, they'd tell us, except that we toured the Midwest and literally played Peoria a dozen times.

We finally called it a day in 1959. Twenty years on the road. We had some good nights and some bad nights. One night we were hot, the next we were in a Chicago catering hall playing some kid's bar mitzvah. Our road manager was really something else. There was no out-of-the-way hole-in-the-wall dive he didn't have a friend at. So we never went hungry, and our kids never went hungry, and that's more than a lot of acts who recorded more frequently than we ever did are able to say.

We called him Gussy, and that was a joke. There was a bit of a swish about him, just in the way he walked and talked. It was like a kitchen faucet—he could run hot and cold. Turn on the left tap, and he would practically levitate, so light in the loafers was he. Turn on the right tap, and he'd have two women in his lap, and both of them loved it. No cattiness when he was around, no sir. There was plenty for everyone, a tasty buffet.

"The Return of Mister Hotsy-Totsy" was a song I composed for him. The bee-dee-dee-doop-ah-da was how I felt when I saw him, and the bass line, so rich and dark, like Mingus before Mingus made it big—well, that was just what Gussy was.

So, who is this fellow in the photograph? His son or grandson I presume. It's the spitting image, I tell you.

The Queen of Them All

Ed Kurtz

At the checkpoint, Katie Ann paused to unload the contents of her pockets into her handbag: cigarettes, disposable lighter, car keys, and her most recent letter from Bez. She handed the purse to a stone-faced guard, who commenced pawing through it with detached indifference. Another guard, burly and unshaven for what she guessed to be the better part of a week, gave her a once-over with his watery brown eyes before gesturing for a female officer lingering in the dim hall. The officer loped over, patted her down, ran her fingers under the wire of her bra and up her crotch from back to front.

“She’s good.”

The final step in the procedure involved a cursory sweep with a beeping wand, which shrieked at her earrings but otherwise cleared her of contraband. She was handed her purse and escorted through the next locked door, which squealed on its hinges and crunched shut behind her.

While she walked silently beside the burly guard over the dirty white and gray tiles, she dwelt upon the letter for the hundredth time. For this, she did not need to dig it out of her handbag, because she had memorized it, line for line, before she arrived at Beaumont.

Beaumont was a state prison, maximum security, and home to Bez Horvath for the last seven years, three months, and nine days. This too she had memorized, the exact length of his sentence and the time served—as well as time

remaining until his next parole hearing, which happened to be a week from next Monday.

She did not expect the hearing to go well. Bez was unpopular, demonized in the press, and an example for harsher sentences on repeat offenders. Had he remained incarcerated on his initial aggravated-assault conviction, he would never have had the opportunity to take the lives of most of the Weber family in Magnolia, Mississippi, the day after Christmas, 1989. Three people—two adults and a boy of eleven—would in all likelihood still be alive now, and poor Katie Ann Weber, only thirteen that day and the only one Bez Horvath suffered to live, would still have a family.

The door at the end of the hall buzzed noisily and the guard hauled it open, whereupon he gestured for her to pass into the next segment of the hallway. From there the guard yanked his key ring out on its retractable wire and selected the key that unlocked the third door on the right. A reedy guard in an ill-fitting blue uniform awaited her on the other side. He gently touched her shoulder and directed her to the second-to-last booth in a row of eight.

She lowered her slight frame into the orange plastic chair between the grimy partitions, set her purse on the chipped Formica table in front of her, and stared through the smudged glass that separated her from the empty, matching orange chair on the other side. She did not have to wait long. In a moment, he was led out, cuffed at the wrists and ankles, his jumpsuit clean and ironed. His hair was slicked back with pomade and the tattoo on his neck peeked out from beneath his collar, revealing only a hint of the barbed wire wound around the cross underneath. When he saw her, he smiled. Even his eyes smiled, which she always found to be a tell—false smiles left the eyes alone.

Bez Horvath sat down, rested his elbows on the table, and blew her a kiss. She picked up the receiver from the handset on the wall. He grabbed its twin on the other side, chuckled lightly, and whispered into the mouthpiece.

"Hi, Katie."

February 14, 1996

Beaumont Max

Mississippi

Dear Katie Ann,

Hi pumpkin. Thanks for the letter and the cookies. I felt like the cock of the walk, eating them in front of everybody. It's the little things sometimes.

Thanks also for the books. I already read the Cussler and I'm starting on the Ludlum. I'm sure I'll have to hit the library before you can send more. Not a lot to do in here but lift and read. The library doesn't have much worth reading though, unless you're studying law to try and get yourself off. But I'll never get off, so that's out for me, isn't it?

I don't mean to sound pessimistic. I know my hearing is coming up. There's something to be said for the con who owns up to what he did and expresses repentance, but that doesn't bring your daddy, mama, and brother back. Nothing can do that, and that's what prisons are for, I guess. I'll probably die in this place, but so long as I got you I can't say I mind it too much.

It takes some crazy stuff to bring people together sometimes, doesn't it, pumpkin?

Love always, Valentine.

Bez

"Some lady wrote from England, says she wants to marry me," he said.

"More fan mail?"

"Every week. Week in and week out."

"How many of those have you gotten?"

"Marriage proposals? I don't know—fifteen or so by now. This is my first out of country, though."

"Probably just wants a green card."

"Hey now, I'm not such a bad catch."

"No, baby. No, you're not."

"You should write a letter like that, maybe."

Katie Ann blanched.

"Bez . . ."

"Just a thought, pumpkin," he said, grinning wolfishly.

"Just a thought."

In the summer of '84 Bez got drunk in a Greenwood honky-tonk where he met a girl name of Sherri Grubbs. She showed him the two-step over a trio of songs on the juke, and he schooled her in the basic points of astrology, a favorite strategy for seducing daughters. By midnight the pair was kissing sloppily in the gravel parking lot beside Sherri's El Camino, and by half past her old man came barreling down on them with a tire iron in his hand and hate burning in his pale, wet eyes.

Bez beat the old boy so bad he was in the ICU straight through autumn, on a liquid diet until the following year, and unable to walk without a cane for the remainder of his life. It was an error on Bez's part, for when he left the guy on the gravel he was sure the man was dead. That was his intention.

The court-appointed defense attorney managed to bring the charge down from attempted murder to aggravated assault, whereupon Bez was convicted by a jury of his so-called peers and sentenced to ten in the pen. He was paroled after just four and half. Hitchhiked across the state. Found his way to a bump in the road called Magnolia.

And in Magnolia, Bez Horvath fell in love.

July 5, 1990

Darling Bez,

I dreamed about Mama again last night. It's terrible weird how I don't remember anything when I'm awake, but

dreaming it all comes in clear, like a television. Used to be when I was little we only got the UHF stations at night. I never knew why, but at daytime all we got was static. It's like that. When I'm asleep I can hear Mama caterwauling about Bobby and your boots on the stairs, and her turning out to the hallway just when you get to the landing with Daddy's wood ax. She looks right past you, right at me, like she can see the whole thing before it happens. She knows you won't take me too. She knows you love me. Was that really how it all happened? Dreams are funny sometimes.

And you, Bez—you're always so bright, like a flash cloud in a bad storm, like hi-beams on a brand new Ford. My angel, an avenging angel in my dreams, come to take me away from it all. But here I am with Aunt Joelee in Liberty and you in stir and another three years before I can go where I please anyway. It just isn't fair, baby. I can only see you in dreams till I'm seventeen. That may as well be a hundred years from now.

Don't forget to send your letters to Crystal's address. Joelee just burns them in the stove.

Yours forever,
Katie Ann Weber

The suggestion wormed its way through the pathways of Katie Ann's brain while she undressed in room 325 of the HWY 10 Sleep Inn and ran a sputtering jet of warm water into the tub. When the bath was filled, she slid down into it and gave a long, hard look at the naked ring finger on her left hand. Katie Ann closed her eyes and let her hand sink into the tepid water, and she remembered sucking on a soda pop outside McCallister's Sundries in Magnolia, MS, Pop. 2,071, in a pair of salmon clam diggers and asking the handsome stranger what kind of name was Bez?

Short for Bezaliel.

Is that from the Bible?

Sort of.

My daddy's name is Amos, and that's an olden times prophet.

I know.

He warbled a few lines of Carl Perkins' "Pink Pedal Pushers" and gave her a wink. Katie Ann liked the way the skin around his big brown eye crinkled when he did so. She hoped she would see Bez-Short-for-Bezaliel again.

She did, naturally; and Katie Ann Weber was an orphan by morning.

Katie Ann dunked her head under and emerged half a minute later, blinking the soapy water from her eyelashes.

Pink pedal pushers has made her the queen of them all, ooh-wop-a-doo . . .

"Well, you sure ain't going to marry no lady from England, Bezzie," she whispered to the glimmering faucet with a giggle. She soaped up her chin-length chestnut hair and decided that she really was the queen of them all. Had been since that Big Day back in '89.

(How does she go—pop!)

They were married by proxy, a file clerk in the JP's office standing in for Bez and turning purple when he had to say *I do*. Katie Ann made a point of informing him that there would be no kiss at the end. Her lips were for Bez only, and all the rest of her besides.

When it was done, she stopped at a drugstore for another couple of paperbacks before driving directly to Beaumont. Her first order of business was to show the marriage license to the prison chaplain for proof and records. Only then would she and her new groom be permitted a modicum of time for a private visit—their very first.

The new Mr. and Mrs. Horvath were fortunate that Bez was incarcerated in one of only six states that permitted "Sunday visits." After a thorough search and a review of Bez's most recent blood test to attest that he was, in fact, free of VD, man and wife entered what could only be

described as a “bedroom-like facility” consisting of a double bed, nightstand, and lamp. The floor was the same scuffed tile as the labyrinthine hallways that snaked throughout the compound. The walls were cinderblocks painted slate gray. The stale air smelled strongly of disinfectant.

Bez kissed Katie Ann on the nape of her neck. She shuddered. At twenty, she remained a virgin, having waited for this moment since she was still only a girl in her pink pedal pushers back in Magnolia. Primed by a pomaded drifter to become the queen of them all. Her eyes spilled over. Bez rasped, “*Shh.*”

Over the years, her period had been irregular. So irregular, in fact, that when she missed a month she rarely batted an eye. At two months without, however, Katie Ann batted both eyes. She rushed to the corner store and snagged a store-brand one-step pregnancy test, after which she filled up her basket with a passel of things she didn’t really need just so the test would not be the only thing she brought to the cashier. Katie Ann hauled her mini powdered donuts, diet cola, shampoo, travel deodorant, menthol cigarettes, and two milk chocolate bars along with the pregnancy test out to her Subaru hatchback and stepped on the gas all the way home.

The rest she left in the car as she bolted into the trailer, unbuckling her belt. She peed with the bathroom door open. And she waited with her blue jeans and panties still bunched up at her tattooed ankles.

Five minutes passed and they felt like five days and when it was over there was a tiny pink plus in the little window.

Katie Ann was with child. Bez Horvath’s child.

She whooped like an Indian on the warpath in some old TV western show.

“Ooh-wop-a-doo.”

He crooned and sniggered while he washed up in the basin, rinsing the blood from his hands and neck with cold water. The wood ax rested on its head on the bathroom floor, the haft against the toilet bowl, and when little Katie Ann saw how far it was from Bez-Short-for-Bezaliel's reach she knew how easily she could get to it before him. But this was nothing more than a passing fancy. She remained where she stood in the hallway in her ankle-length nightgown, all cotton and lace and just as pink as her pedal pushers.

"She wears a-pink pedal pushers, pink pedal pushers . . .

Pink pedal pushers has made her the queen of them all—"

Bez paused, ran his hands through his thick, wet hair, and turned his gaze on the child watching him from the hall.

"How does she go?"

Together, the blood-soaked killer and the sole survivor screeched, "Pop!"

She nearly collapsed with a fit of giggles. And Bez Horvath—he fairly glowed.

December 26, 1992 (A day late.)

Beaumont Max

Mississippi

Merry Xmas Katie Ann,

That makes it four years since I met you, and it makes you a free-and-clear woman of seventeen, too. Sorry I missed your birthday. I knew when it was but they were holding out on me, paper and pen-wise. The authorities here aren't always very nice to us who live here, but it's not always so bad. A roof, a bed, and three square. A man could do worse.

Four years. When I saw you, I loved you. And I knew then I would make you mine. That's why I came down to you and sang you that song. That's how come I set you free from them that would bind you.

See me, darling Katie Ann. Come to Beaumont. There isn't a thing your Aunt Joelee can do about it now.

Yours,
Bez

In August, in the same booth she always occupied when visiting Bez—second from last, number 7—during the brief minutes before he was brought in, shackled like a circus lion, Katie Ann’s water broke.

It took another woman to assess the situation—an older Hispanic lady visiting her son, who spoke first in Spanish before switching to accented English: “She have a baby.”

Bez appeared behind the glass and threw himself up against it, his eyes bright and perfect teeth glinting in the fluorescent light. His breath fogged the glass before a guard yanked him back. Katie Ann moaned; she felt fear mounting inside her until her eyes met Bez’s and he laughed and the room became unbearably bright.

She was no longer afraid. Any moment Bez was going to become a father.

Her angel was going to be a daddy.

Katie Ann smiled and she cried. And then, when the pain struck her like a white-hot poker in the abdomen, the whole of the visitation room was swallowed up by total whiteness.

“Go outside now.”

The girl stood still for a second, then glanced down at her bare feet on the blood-stained carpet.

Bez said, “It won’t be cold long. You’ll be all right.”

He was right. Bez was always right, and he always told the truth.

Katie Ann went outside, careful to stay on the walkway, away from the frost on the grass. She kept on to the mailbox by the road even when she smelled the smoke, but she flung herself around at the sound of the breaking glass. The house went up like a tinderbox, the tangerine-orange flames licking out of the smashed windows and igniting the shingles on the roof. Katie Ann back-stepped to the mailbox,

leaned against the post, and watched her family's home become engulfed in the blaze with equal parts regret and fascination. And she waited for Bez to come back out.

The ground floor ignited more slowly than the second, where the fire must have started, and those windows also burst from the heat. Soon the front porch was subsumed in roiling flames that moved like ocean water, and only then did Bez-Short-for-Bezaliel, handsome as ever despite the shirt burning to ashes on his back, emerge from the inferno. The porch collapsed behind him, sending up a maelstrom of sparks and smoke and shooting flares that, for a moment, looked to Katie Ann Weber like wings.

"Hi, baby," he said.

In the middle distance, sirens whined. Katie Ann's eyes bulged and she tugged at the hem of her nightgown.

"You best get out of here," she warned. "They'll want to put you in jail."

"I don't mind," Bez told her. "I can wait. For you, I can wait."

He rolled his shoulders and the last vestiges of his incinerated shirt dropped to the walkway where they smoldered. Bubblegum lights pulsed at the turnoff to Route 10, a quarter of a mile up the road.

Beaumont housed no female inmates, and as such its infirmary was not equipped for the delicate business of childbirth, much less the birth of a child whose mother was unconscious. Nonetheless, the paramedics who answered the call decided not to transport her to the hospital, instead opting to deliver the baby themselves in the relative sterility of the infirmary. Capsule after capsule of ammonia carbonate was snapped in her face, waking her long enough to bellow and push before passing out again to start over. In the end, the delivery took three hours. To the delight of the attending medics, it went as well as could be expected, given the circumstances, though Katie Ann passed out again before

they could present to her the unusually heavy newborn baby girl. One last capsule brought her back, whereupon she gaped at her daughter, tears spilling freely down her apple-red cheeks, and then to the far end of the bright, white room where Bezaliel Horvath stood.

He was nude, pale, the barbed-wire cross on his chest almost silver in the way it gleamed beneath the ceiling lights. A small smile played at his lips as he took a single step forward and held out his hands. Katie Ann smiled back at him, mouthed his name. Bezaliel canted his head to the left, crinkled his honest brown eyes. Behind him, a faint crackle erupted into a thunderous gust and fire climbed the walls.

The flames spread, up and outward, taking the shape of broad, red wings. As Bezaliel resumed his approach, the wings kept pace. They were part of him now.

The officer by the door withdrew his service pistol and drew a bead, center mass. The fire comprising Bezaliel's wings shot at him in a spiraling column, igniting his uniform. The paramedics babbled and scrambled out of the way. Bezaliel reached for the swaddled child one of them held tight to his chest. The terrified medic froze momentarily, then handed the baby to her father.

Bezaliel curled his left arm around the child and turned back to Katie Ann. His wings swung in a broad arc that overwhelmed the two medics with heat and flame. They shrieked and clawed at one another, at the walls, at the unbroken circle of hell that now surrounded them all.

Katie Ann softly wept.

"Bez."

He shushed her. "Quiet, daughter of man."

The child let loose a shrill wail. The angel bent at the waist and kissed Katie on the brow. What would have been the carpal joint on a bird's wing brushed the ceiling and set it aflame.

“When I saw you, I loved you,” he said, his voice gentle but not overpowered by the din of the blaze.

“I was . . . the queen of ’em all,” she rasped.

“Always, my love. Always.”

With that, Bezaliel gave his bride a wink, shielded the puling baby with his arms, passed into the wall of fire and out of the infirmary.

Katie Ann erupted into a spasming fit of smoky coughs, curled up on her side, and whispered—

“How does she go?”

—before the ceiling caved in on her of her and she breathed her last.

(Pop!)

Her Sweet Solace

J. T. Glover

Deanna slumps against the wall outside the kitchen, heart twisting like a downed power line as she listens to her faithless mother cry out. Tears drip from her bulging eyes, and she wonders why the neighbors haven't called the cops. Then—silence, the scrape of a Bic lighter, and the rank smell of one of her mother's Dorals.

"God, I've been needing that," her mother says, voice jagged. "You have no idea."

"Oh, I know," comes a hollow voice, a Darth Vader voice that fits too perfectly. "Believe me, I know."

In her mind's eye, Deanna sees the tableau again. Short North High out early after a fire drill, she has snuck in through the basement, gleefully imagining her mom's shocked face when she jumps out at her. Now she crouches in the hall, peering around the corner. Her mother lies naked on the kitchen table, legs spread wide, feet planted flat on the green plastic tablecloth. Between Deanna and her mother is a man covered in purple flame. His head bobs at her mother's crotch, and she's moaning.

Deanna sits by Mirror Lake, pitching stones into the water when no one's looking, the setting sun occluded by the red-brick mass of Campbell Hall. After sneaking back out of the house, she drifted through the quiet streets of Harrison West, past the Victorian mansions of Neil Avenue, eventually stopping at the rock-lined pond on the Ohio State campus. Most of the benches were taken by couples, but eventually

one opened up, overshadowed by lindens and grubby with sap. It suits her mood just fine, and everyone ignores her—pallid girl with lank brown hair, camo coat not quite ratty enough to be cool, eyes permanently squinted from too many nights spent reading the latest Kim Harrison or Patricia Briggs.

What do I do? she thinks, worrying at a nail. *Dad hasn't even been gone a year. This is crazy. What the hell was that thing she was . . .*

Deanna grinds her teeth, the tang of bile welling up in her throat. She saw something in her house. A man—no, a *thing*—covered in purple fire, going down on her mother.

Purple fire, she thinks. *This isn't fucking True Blood. This is my life, and—*

“There’s no fucking demons,” she growls, stomach clenching.

The sudden silence from the next bench over suggests it’s time to move on, so she heads up the path to the library, hands in her pockets, just wanting to be able to deal. Everything she planned to do tonight suddenly hazy and unimportant, from studying for Spanish to practicing for Tuesday’s piano lesson with Miss Colette. The library looms in front of her, a great glass-fronted pile of Indiana limestone rubbed smooth by long-dead masons, and she wonders if she’s losing her mind.

Most people who see demons are schizo. Who says you aren't?

A group of ROTC cadets jog past, cadence booming off the library’s façade, and she stares after them, absently wondering how she’s supposed to judge her own sanity. She looks at her palms, at the divots that have crusted into sticky scabs. They don’t prove a damn thing—just that she clenched her fists.

Suddenly Deanna yawns, jaws cracking, thinking of food for the first time since lunch, and she wishes she had a boy

to hold her. The anger draining away, she's only worried for her mother. Whatever she saw, her mom's in danger.

So what do I do? How am I supposed to ask her anything?

She can't, of course. If she's going crazy, the questions will start, and then pills and a rubber room. If she's not crazy, then . . . what? Deanna stares at the moon rising through the trees, yellow and gravid like a rotten grapefruit, trying to solve a problem without an answer.

This time Deanna enters through the front door, and the house is silent. The yellow glow from the streetlights leaks into the living room through the Venetian blinds. The furniture she's grown up with—the aubergine couch, the glass-top coffee table, the blue corduroy easy chair where her daddy used to watch *Law & Order* and drain cans of Genesee—has become strange to her. Devils and bad ghosts wait around every corner.

“Mom . . . ?”

No reply, so she walks down the hall. The door to her parents' bedroom, now her mother's, is half-closed, the lights off. She stops, trying to decide whether to open the door all the way.

“Deanna, come in here,” her mother says from within.
“Please don't turn on the light.”

Deanna hesitates, then walks into the dark room, bumping her knee against the chest of drawers, just like always. She edges over to the bed and gingerly lowers herself onto the duvet.

“Baby,” her mom whispers, and now Deanna can hear it in her voice, the cracked tone her mother gets after crying.

“You're way late. What happened?”

“I'm sorry, mom. Tara asked if I wanted to go catch a matinee at the Lennox, and then we went over to Stauf's for coffee.”

“Okay. I just worry, that's all. Your phone?”

“Need to charge it. Sorry.”

To this her mother doesn't respond. Deanna can't see it in the darkness, but she senses her fumbling around on the nightstand. In the brief flare of the lighter, her mother's face is a war of grief and shame, desire and sorrow. The grooves left by her father's death, by the smoke she sucks into her lungs, silence the careful questions Deanna planned on the walk home.

She's startled when her mother's hand covers her own on the bed sheet. Slowly, hesitantly, Deanna grips her mom's hand back and they sit there in silence. Her nose itches at the smoke, and she can imagine the blue cloud around her head, but tonight she doesn't say anything.

"Dinner's in the fridge if you want it," her mother says. "It's not much, but I made a potato-bacon casserole this afternoon."

So Deanna gets up and starts to walk out of the room, running a frustrated hand through her hair, stops when her mother speaks again.

"I wish your father were still here, sweetie. I miss Friday nights."

Deanna smiles in spite of herself. Before the tumor came, he'd been adamant about Friday nights, regardless of what plans her friends might have. Pizza, beer for her parents and Coke for her, and board games. Every goddamn Friday night—Monopoly, Axis & Allies, Scrabble. She'd hated it at the time, of course. Her mom had tried to get them to start again a few months after he was gone, but they'd both felt the hollowness.

"I know, Mom. Me too."

She walks down the hall to the living room and into the kitchen, mulling things over. Nothing in her mother's voice but sadness—like Deanna hasn't heard from her since the night in the hospice when he took that slow, final breath.

What the hell, she thinks. She's grief-stricken, and I'm crazy. Thanks for leaving us, Dad. Way to go.

Deanna opens the vintage 1970 refrigerator's olive green door and peers around for the casserole. From the other end of the house comes the sound of muffled sobbing, and she turns toward it, unsure what to do. That's when Deanna sees the wrinkles and blisters in the tablecloth. She looks closer and feels her face writhe through a half-dozen expressions—twisting like plastic exposed to high heat.

Saturday afternoon, and Deanna stands looking through the grubby windows of Magickal Kingdom, hands wrapped around her backpack's straps, but soon she's going to have to decide. Gray clouds threatening overhead, and it's not exactly the nicest block of High Street. Most of the other businesses nearby are long closed, bottles and dead condoms mounded in the doorways. A scruffy guy in an Indians jacket stands at the bus stop across the street, legs spread wide and nodding at her as he points at his crotch.

The bells hanging from the door tinkle as she pushes it open and steps inside. It's not as dark as it looks from the sidewalk, and lamps with colorful shades give the place a warm, inviting feel. Still, she gazes apprehensively at the shelves, higgledy-piggledy with jars and incense and all sorts of things she doesn't recognize, unsure where to go next.

"Can I help you?" asks the large, acne-scarred woman behind the counter.

"Yeah," Deanna says, scrounging in her coat pocket for the list she wrote out that morning as she sat in the library, surrounded by herds of dusty books. "I need a whole bunch of stuff. Maybe it'd just be easier if I gave you the list."

The woman smiles pleasantly and takes the sheet of paper. She starts to read it, then wrinkles her brow and looks up at Deanna.

"I don't want to sound rude, but how old was the book you got these ingredients from?"

"Well, it was—"

“No one uses measures like this anymore. I mean, everyone uses some kind of measurement, but the Craft isn’t about seven drams of clarified Abyssinian goat essence, whatever that is.”

Deanna doesn’t say anything, not trusting herself to speak as she feels the quivering in her lips, just nods.

“Hey, hey, I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, or stop you from doing what you’re trying to do. Why don’t you tell me what you want, and maybe we can put something together?”

Deanna looks at the woman, wondering if she’s ever watched a person being used by a demon—what one old French grimoire called an *amator diabolicus*—her very life draining away in the guise of sexual release. The shopkeeper sits there, silver-ringed fingers folded on the counter, and she looks as if she was born into the wood-and-raffia necklace that hangs down over her velvet dress. A nice woman, yes, and maybe a good confidante for lonely outsiders, but she hasn’t seen everything.

“It’s a banishment ritual,” Deanna says. “Just trying to get rid of some negative influences.”

“All right, lots of ways to do that. Given the feel of this list, I’m guessing it’s pretty serious. Let’s start with the ferric salts . . . ”

Twenty minutes later, Deanna is considerably more impressed, watching as the woman grinds dozens of ingredients together in a stone mortar, all the while talking confidently about the properties associated with each.

“So these are ingredients that have been used for a long time?” Deanna asks, starting to hope.

“All my herbs and minerals are traditional. This isn’t a food chemistry lab, and we aren’t making Twinkies,” she says with a laugh. “Much of what’s in here was used by the alchemists and ceremonial magicians of the Middle Ages, near as anyone can tell. Some were even used to summon or

banish demons. Whatever you're trying to get rid of, this is potent stuff."

"Yeah, well, I've got serious problems."

"Yeah, well, this is serious magick," the woman says with asperity as she finishes her grinding and pours the mortar's contents into a paper bag. "Be careful how you use it. I don't want to see you in here next month because your boyfriend's moved to Manitoba and won't return your calls. Now, do you know just what you're going to do with this stuff?"

"I've got some ideas," Deanna says, smiling for the first time since looking into the kitchen, "but maybe you can give me a pointer or two."

Sunday afternoon is overcast and muggy, though it's not June yet, and even the grass doesn't want to move. Deanna stands quietly beside her mother, mood blacker than her dress, staring down at the grave, wishing she could feel the calm that usually comes in Union Cemetery. Whatever was right in the world last Sunday—whatever fragments of her life she'd managed to put right—has been derailed completely. Even her favorite stompy boots, the black ones with all the straps and buckles that made her father laugh, can't comfort today. When her mother wraps one arm around her shoulders and starts snuffling, it's all Deanna can do not to shove her down.

What's wrong with you?

Her mother's arm starts to shake, and then she's sobbing, and Deanna finally puts an arm around her, grimacing but unable to help herself, two images warring in her mind. Her mother and father, laughing on their trip to the Hocking Hills in the autumn two years ago, and her mother wiping a smear of dirt from his face. Her mother and the fire-coated creature in the kitchen, coupling, pleasure in her father's absence, him not even a year gone.

“Oh, Deanna,” her mother says, voice trembling, “I miss him so much.”

This sets off a fresh storm of tears, her mother’s like a mask out of Greek tragedy. Deanna wraps both arms around her, staring through the fence at the steady stream of cars and SUVs passing on Olentangy. She holds her mother’s shaking, running-to-flab frame and wishes she were anywhere else.

I need to be sure, she thinks, grimacing. I need to know for sure.

Deanna opens her mouth, trying to find the words, and then she’s sobbing too, the big whoops that she had thought were all gone a month after her father’s death. It’s like her chest is cracking down the middle, her guts twisting around shards of glass. In that moment, she hates her mother, her father, the world.

She thrusts her mother away and runs for the car, ignoring her mother’s cry.

Why can’t you leave me alone? Why couldn’t you just leave each other alone? If I hadn’t been born, I wouldn’t hurt like this. I wouldn’t feel anything at all.

Wednesday afternoon, school not out early this time, and Deanna edges past her mother’s rusty Chevelle, stepping carefully to avoid the loose gravel in the driveway ruts. She stops at the basement door and checks her coat pockets again. The iron knife’s still there, as is the packet of herbs. The words she will need are burned into her brain after days of staring at them every spare moment, scrawled on an index card gone soft and velvety from repeated handling.

She lifts hard on the basement door knob and pulls, the door swinging open silently. She steps inside and crosses the space. Boxes of newspapers in one corner, the hidden fort of a pirate queen; the furnace and its verdigrised copper pipes, the dragon she’s jousting with a thousand times; the old coal

chute, the cave of her dreams. Soon she's at the top of the stairs and slipping into the living room, and then—

Disappointment.

From the end of the hall comes the unmistakable, glottal sound of her mother's snores. The tension slips from Deanna's shoulders, and she walks down the hall, no longer troubling to be quiet, and looks into her mother's bedroom. Mild shock as she realizes her mother lies naked atop the covers. As Deanna's eyes adjust to the light, she starts to pick out the clothing scattered around the room: rumpled jeans, panties hanging off a dresser knob, and the half-torn blouse that lies balled on the floor.

Then the smell hits like a storm cloud: the thick funk of her father's cigars. For months the Romeo y Julietas have lain untouched in their box in the kitchen, slowly going stale, neither she nor her mother quite able to junk them. Somewhere in the house, someone is smoking one of her dead father's cigars, and the unease that's lain coiled in her stomach becomes something else entirely.

Got you now. Wherever the fuck you come from, you're going back.

The demon is sitting at the kitchen table and facing the living room when Deanna rounds the corner. The cigar's tip glows brightly, rafts of smoke already layered up to the ceiling. But for the purple flames, which seem not to touch the cigar, he could be the average man—a little darker complected, with brushy black eyebrows, but average.

"Deanna," he says, looking at her, "you should think about what you're doing."

Stung, she takes out the herb packet, raises the knife above her head, and begins.

"Te evoco, Diabole, in forma—"

"One more word and you hurt your mother more than you'll ever know."

And so she pauses, the ancient words bitter like oil on her tongue.

"I'm not here to hurt anyone, child, least of all your mother."

"I saw you, fucker," she hisses. "You're an amat—"

"Yes, an amator diabolicus, if you want to say it in Latin," he says, removing the cigar from his mouth and resting it in the ashtray. "Don't you know why I'm here?"

He's trying to delay, fool me, she thinks, looking at his wry, earnest face. *I can't fail my mother. I can't fail my father.*

"You're a monster," she says as she raises the packet into the air and points her knife at him, "and you've been feeding on my mother."

"Your mother called *me*," the demon says softly. "Last week I passed near the place where your world touches mine, and her need shone like a beacon. She still loves him so much, Deanna, but she burns."

She looks at the creature staring at her so calmly, and begins to wonder.

"If you banish me, I'll leave," the demon says. "Not because of your petty spell, but because I won't stay where I'm not wanted. Others in this city would welcome me, but I've seen your mother's heart."

"And how do I know this isn't a trick? That she won't wither away to a pale husk in a month?"

The demon laughs politely.

"I'm not a vampire. I'm . . . you don't have a good name for us. Think of me as a comforter. At worst, a leech sucking away bad blood."

"And why should I believe that?" she says, hands starting to shake.

"Has your mother seemed ill in the last week? Unhappy? Has she even vaguely looked like she's wasting away? Deanna, *she doesn't even remember I've been here after I leave.* One day she'll be whole again and I'll move on, because her need will . . . not taste as sweet," he finishes,

shrugging awkwardly. "Your kind hates the sound of that, but it's the truth."

"Why did you have to come?" she whispers.

"That's not what you want to ask, is it?" the demon says, a compassion greater than human lighting his face. "You want to know why your father died. I don't have the answer."

Deanna sits down opposite the demon, planting her elbows on the table, dully watching the purple flames dancing around his head. A minute passes, then another. After a time he looks away from her, eyes shifting nervously from side to side. He picks up the cigar and twiddles it back and forth.

"And this isn't hurting her," Deanna says at last. "Not in the slightest."

"I'm not saying that, but it sure as hell isn't hurting her worse than the smokes," he says. "Those are going to be the death of her—not me."

Silence for a moment, and then she nods.

"All right. But be more discreet. And keep your damn hands off my father's things from now on. You're not my father."

"Never said I was," he replies promptly. "Look, if there comes a time you want me to go, I'll go. Columbus has plenty of grieving, solitary widows. There are car accidents. There's cancer. There's a war on."

Deanna nods again, stone-faced, though she feels the smallest bit of relief inside.

Things could be worse. At least I don't have to deal with an asshole stepfather.

She reaches into her father's cigar box and takes out a Romeo y Julieta, twirls it around, sniffs it. Then she picks up the trimmer and tries to judge the right place to cut.

"Not too far up," the demon says gently. "You want to leave most of the cap on, or it'll unravel."

"Shut up," she mutters.

At last Deanna snaps the cutter closed and the tip falls to the table. Then she lights a match and rotates the cigar like her father used to do. Eventually she puts it in her mouth and inhales, trying not to cough. She tries again, this time only puffing on it, and the demon nods once. They sit at the kitchen table and watch each other warily as the light changes and afternoon becomes night.

Tears For Lilu

Martin Rose

A rusty scalpel, pruning shears, and a chainsaw.

They line a dirty and uneven wooden table while a long shadow stands above the man and asks him to choose. He taps one foot against the chair and considers his options. Rope grates the bones of his wrists and greasy hair falls over his forehead where a bead of sweat forms and drips into the creases of his brow.

The guard in the hot room with the sweating concrete walls does not hate or resent his captive but waits for him to make a choice between the three implements, which he should choose for vile amputation. For this guard, this is business and likewise, it is business for the man as well.

"Might I have a cigarette?" he asks.

The guard hesitates. He knows he should not but the captive is bound to the chair with his arms stretched behind his back and his chest puffs out like a drab bird in his brown suit. The guard sighs before he unties the captive's left arm and offers him a hand rolled from his own pocket and lights it for him.

Bitter smoke envelopes him and the captive thought it would be so.

"You know how I got here, right?" he asks.

The guard shakes his head.

"Well, why don't I tell you," he suggests, "and if you know of Scheherazade, then you know what I am doing, what I am up to."

Prince Khosrow had the poor taste to fall in love. This is his love story, not mine.

The oldest royal family in the region possesses me; through wars and the shifting sands and political turmoil, the palace remained, with its perfumed gardens of jasmine and rose and the many splended rooms of marble and gold. A person can lose themselves for a thousand years in such a place; and so I was lost, until the prince remembered me and found record of me in the sealed palace room where things should remain forgotten.

Lilu.

Khosrow unshackled me with a word. He conjured me and I was catapulted from the dim cosmos to the palace as I had known it a century before. I opened my eyes to the syncopated beat of a bare foot tapping against marble flooring.

“Lilu, spirit of lust. You are mine to command.”

Built slim in his long embroidered robes. Naked toes poked out free beneath the hem and retreated to an expansive rug decorated with cavorting fish and he did not wait for me to speak but rose from the throne and took my hands in his own. He was warm. I smelled citrus on his hands. In the corners of the room beside sumptuous tapestries, the curious gazes of discreet servants watched us.

“I served your father. And his father, and so on, until the beginning of time.”

I did not care for his grin.

“Serve me again, Lilu. I would have the most beautiful woman in the country as my second wife.”

“This is your command?”

“Drive her mad with ecstasy. Fill her dreams with thoughts of me until I win her favor.”

At the time, I did not think to ask about the first wife, his only wife.

Prince Khosrow fell in love not once, but twice.

The first time he married Azru, the daughter of a textile business man with holdings counting into the millions of American dollars: a prized business match before love. Khosrow set his heart before his head when he met Azru—and married her in haste on the basis of her gold-rimmed eyes above the veil, believing the rest of her would match. He was horrified to discover his first chosen wife was in fact, ugly. A man may fantasize of what women hide beneath the cloth. They disguise seductive natures and fierce intelligence. They might wear scandalous lingerie one day and the next dowdy work clothes, and an onlooker never know. That is their clever mystery, their power—to leave everything lying beneath the surface to the imagination, driving men wild.

Or, in Azru's case, to destroy the expectation utterly with a face so lopsided and an appearance so horrific rumor had it Khosrow was like to throw himself from the uppermost balcony to his certain death. But Khosrow was a romantic. If he killed himself he would have nothing to brood over and no one to seduce with his tragic circumstance.

How Azru felt about the match was never discussed. But it has long been a custom in Khosrow's family for the wives to keep "tear catchers." A sultan who leaves for war across the months and years might come back to see which of his wives wept the most in his absence.

Rumor was, Azru's tear catcher was always empty on Khosrow's account.

Naturally, if one wife will not suffice, a man might always choose a second.

Procuring the second wife was another matter altogether.

The woman Khosrow desired for his second wife was called Farrah; and she was beautiful and Khosrow discovered this when he spoke with Farrah's sister, who came bearing a

picture of her beautiful sister. From that moment onward, Khosrow set his heart on Farrah. He wanted her no matter what the cost but Farrah's beauty could command better, richer suitors than Khosrow. Plus, she could command the status of first wife elsewhere. Why should she stoop to the hideous Azru when she might run her own household? She craved respect and control of her own, and would bow to no other woman.

Khosrow attempted to court her with gifts and compliments and even wretched love letters. Farrah was silent as a sphinx and the sand and would not be moved.

In his extremity, he found my name in the closed palace rooms long forgotten by time—and it fell to me to secure Khosrow's conquest. Like a trussed animal I stood before him for his inspection in one of those uncomfortable and inelegant Western suits Khosrow so favored. I longed for the embroidered coats flowing loose and unrestrained.

I pointed out that seducing one too long without relief leads to madness and entropy.

"You are bound to my family, yes? Then you will do this thing for me. It is said you can wear the face of any man you choose. Is this true?"

I smiled, grim. "Your ancestors didn't leave anything out when they wrote of me, did they? What other instructions did they leave? Turn widdershins three times at dawn to banish me, do not feed after midnight, hmmm?"

Khosrow snorted. "They left me enough to know how to bind you to the flesh."

"I noticed," I responded with acid. Not only had I noticed, but I was most uncomfortable to be made manifest in fleshly fetters. An incubus is more comfortable being of the air. Khosrow feared me and wished to anchor me to the earthly realm so my movements would be limited. I was as much a prisoner of his household as his first wife, bound to serve his family since the days of Gilgamesh.

"I wish you to visit Farrah nightly and wear my face.
Haunt her until she comes to me, begging for marriage."

"And risk driving her mad? It must be love."

"Surely a series of visitations is hardly enough to
dismantle the girl."

"Well, you know how old manuscripts are. Unreliable.
Missing pages. I am poison for which the instruction has
been lost. Will you gamble my use without an antidote, *amir*
Khosrow?"

Khosrow tapped his fingers against his thigh as he
pondered this. "Then see to it that should not come to pass,"
he said.

I sighed, and did as I was bid.

Khosrow saddled me in the flesh of a young man; but for this
dark work of sexual plunder, I could not take the body with
me. I lay upon the ground and dreamed—and in this
dreaming sloughed my skin like a king cobra uncoiling in
the sun. Half a ghost and half a man, I plunged through
palace walls calling Farrah's name like a heartbeat.
Somewhere in this city she slept in peace among the
hundreds and I would find her like a beacon on the strength
of a photograph and a lock of her hair between my fingers
where my body still slumbered.

Yet between here and there lay a succession of empty
palace rooms and cold stone—I turned and stumbled into
another person's dream like a cat burglar going from house
to house.

An accident. Few would recall my blundering into their
dream space and I hesitated to gather my surroundings.
Indigo fabric draping the doorway, orchids arranged in a
vase on the table, a woman sleeping on her pillow.
Fascinated, I stared at her. I could not see her face. How
curious, I thought. Even when this one sleeps, even in her
dreams, she sleeps with her *chador* on.

The dreamer awoke. Her eyes fluttered in flecks of raw gold and fixed on me.

I realized then I had discovered the chambers of the hideous Azru, and dream-walked into her unconsciousness by accident.

She blinked once more and I was gone and evaporated from her as easily as a mist. She was not my business and in the morning she would not remember the passage of a middling demon through her nighttime hours.

One tires of romantic interludes across the span of millennia; kisses become banal, trivial. Caresses and touches become pedestrian, a means to an end serving to atrophy my passion further. And when it was over, I retreated into the shadows and left Farrah to believe Prince Khosrow had walked into her dreams and ravished her. My hard work and sweat gone to credit another man. Such is life. And for now this was the bloom of lust—poison taken in small doses could stimulate the body and the mind. We had yet to cross the liminal space into the sickening, when my touch would corrupt instead of inspire, jaundice her skin, crack her, teeth and steal the perfume from her breath and ferment it into rot.

Even demons must rest.

I retreated once more to the distant rooms and the cold marble floors. I found the library bequeathed to Khosrow by his ancestors. Pillows piled in discreet corner where I pulled several volumes and nestled, this body bruised and exhausted as I turned the pages.

The caretaker left the windows open. Hot summer air brought me jasmine and I drifted in an idyll of burnished silence. From page to page the words lost meaning and light spiraled in with a haze. The knobs of my spine pressed against pillar stone and my feet bare and toes touching. I fell to fitful rest until a rustling awakened me.

I opened my eyes.

A woman stood before me.

I dropped the book and shot to my feet. Protocol is serious business in this region as it is in all of the country; a man and a woman must not suffer each other's company together, alone, in solitude. Of course, she had not known I was here—none in the royal household but Khosrow was aware of my presence.

Gold-tinged eyes stared at me from a gap of embroidered cloth and the rest of her swathed in black.

Shit. Azru. The first wife.

I bowed and looked away. To stare at a woman is as like to touch her, make love to her. In this place, everything is charged and electrified when a man and a woman are alone in the room. A man does not stare a woman in the eyes. People have been killed for less. Oh, how Khosrow would laugh at that—a demon defined by lust, so modestly averting his gaze.

I hesitated. I should apologize and leave, but where would I go? I had no place.

She kneeled to pick up the book. She thrust her thumb into the pages and held it out to me and I swallowed. She did not look away. She looked directly at me. How many lashes would we be accorded for this infringement? Seventy? A hundred?

"He doesn't love me anymore," she said.

"I do not know what of what you speak—"

"And he's hired you to kill me, hasn't he? To make room for *her*."

I sighed. "If it comforts you any, he will tire of her soon enough and take another. And after that, another."

"No," she snapped. "It does not *comfort* me. I will still be made worthless and die in dishonor as the world's most hideous woman."

I cocked my head, studied the slice of her face visible to me. The thin curve of her eyelids and the smoky lashes framing golden eyes. Indeed, one might never know from

looking at her that parents frightened their children with tales of disfigured *amira* Azru.

"Surely it's not that bad."

Her golden eyes examined me. "Do you know what it is to be ugly? I doubt it, you with your fine suit and your chiseled face. Tell me, did you have plastic surgery to look like a cheap paperback romance cover, or does it come naturally?"

I blinked. If her sharpness of tongue was a preview to her face she could draw blood with a stare.

"All natural," I snapped in return.

"So then you're here to seduce me, hmm? That would be a trick of Khosrow's. Entice me into adultery so he can legally kill me. He'd like that, wouldn't he?"

I laughed. "No, he hired me to seduce Farrah."

She cursed. "What, to ruin her? Make her worthless so none will take her, and she will have to crawl to him for marriage?"

"My lady, you have me mistaken for someone else," I explained.

"I'm not stupid. I am not mistaken at all. That's the benefit to being ugly. You can't coast through life by virtue of your good looks. You have to be smart, Mr. Suit. You have to be intelligent. You have to crash parties and load the dice. Ugliness does not tolerate the lazy."

I gestured to her face, the thin gauze of material separating us.

"Come," I said, "show me."

She snorted in derision. The dare was loaded with social implications. Woman only took off the *chador* in the company of relatives or other women in the privacy of their home. It is intimate. For a strange man to make such a scandalous request would earn me imprisonment; for her to indulge me would earn her lashes untold if not execution itself. I might have asked her to take off her clothes and stand naked.

She tapped her foot. I sucked in a breath.

She reached up and snatched the fabric away.

This is usually the part of the story where one discovers the heroine has been brainwashed into believing she is ugly, when in fact her beauty is astounding and awe-inspiring and will no doubt capture my heart with her modesty and virtue.

This was not so.

She was ugly after all.

We were lonely possessions of a jealous prince. Left to ourselves we sought amusement to pass the time. After that, we met in the library regularly.

We spoke of Khosrow and Farrah. Some hours we passed in communal silence reading books until she or I fell asleep in the perfumed wind. A safety pervaded our company long forgotten, or never known while I was busy fucking on command for every royal from here to the Caspian Sea, to drive rivals into madness, to destroy threats to the empires, to whore as a gift for services rendered. Azru asked for nothing, and I asked nothing of her. It was hard to describe her ugliness and she admitted that when she was young a dog attacked her and tore off the lower half of her face. If not for this, her beauty would have been legendary. All that remained was a suggestion of it, the ghost of another face hiding inside of her own.

Meanwhile, my nights were spent in any number of sex acts until I'd exhausted every page of the Kama Sutra and struggled to keep attentive to Farrah's hungry needs. I did not begrudge her desire, but there is only so much interest a thousand-year-old demon can maintain. I was tiring of being used this way, but Khosrow swore Farrah was coming around. She was entertaining his proposal and had confessed to him only the other day she had the most tantalizing dreams of him, but she would not say of what nature they were.

"Boring and unimaginative sex, in case you were wondering," I groaned when he asked me for details. "Are

you sure you wish to be shackled for eternity to a woman with no poetry in her heart but to repeat, 'Yes, fuck me, there, harder'?"

"I don't need her for poetry," Khosrow scoffed. "I just *need* her."

I reflected on Azru. I suspected she could come up with better poetry, but it was not for me to say.

On the fourteenth day of haunting Farrah, I could not bring myself to do it.

The poor girl was skipping meals and growing thin. Given long enough, she would stop bathing and grooming and fall into ruin if there were not a conclusion soon. I considered she would do well to have a break and so instead of invading Farrah's dream land, I came to Azru—uninvited.

We met in the thin dream space between consciousness, this precarious plane of existence which only the few may wander unmolested. I took a spot on the floor of her bedroom in the palace and she awoke, in this dream within a dream.

"Lilu," she observed.

"I was thinking," I said slowly, "that I might sleep here for a night."

"Are you hurt?"

I did not answer. The many nights of lovemaking had taken a toll and I craved a quiet, safe space. Here in the swaths of purple and indigo tapestries and the plush pillows where she rose with her black hair coiled in ropes of silk, I felt peace. Books dog-eared and loved, stacked and fallen in a jumble, every which way.

"I am an incubus," I said. "And when you wake up, you will remember none of this."

"I am dreaming?"

"Yes."

"You're not an incubus. My husband hired you to ruin Farrah. Yet another empty-headed snake in my husband's

den of vipers.”

“This viper is old, my lady. It will not be long before Farrah will become second wife. Perhaps you might find a modicum of peace knowing you can annoy her for the rest of your married life.”

She shook her head. “I fear that is not to be. He will get rid of me. Send me away or fabricate a crime I must be punished for. I hear him making plans for the wedding night. I will not be here, mark me.”

I frowned to hear it. Would Khosrow be so low as to cast his first wife out of the house? Azru had nothing of value, not even beauty to defend her.

“And what will you do, when he marries and your task is done? What do incubi do when they are doing nothing at all, exactly?”

I gestured vaguely to the air.

“I am a part of this palace. I will haunt until I am called to service again.”

“How did you come to be here?”

“I was human once,” I sighed.

“How did you become this incubus?”

“Rare components must coalesce. One must first be in love; and die ever-wanting and unrequited. The lust follows us into afterlife, and thus we are crippled by our own, unsatisfied want, hungry and unable to be filled. But this alone would populate the world with lustful haunts and is not enough to provide the final catalyst for transformation.”

Her gold eyes widened and then narrowed as though she crossed a spectrum of feeling I lacked the skill to translate—nuances lost with my bones and become dust and sand in the passage of centuries and with it all my human sensibility.

“Is this how it was for you, then?”

I swallowed. “For the change to be complete . . . one must drink the other’s tears.”

A silence descended. Her eyes charted me from my crown to my feet and then settled on my eyes as though estimating me by new measurements, and what she saw satisfied her. A puff of breath escaped and tented the fabric over her mouth before deflating. She looked away to the glass vial on the end table—the much fabled tear catcher that Azru could not fill.

“You were in love, then?”

“A long time ago.”

“What was it like?”

“I don’t remember.”

She nodded, pragmatic. “I don’t, either.”

And strangely, it made me laugh.

The next day, Khosrow gave me the news.

“Farrah’s accepted!” He clapped me over the shoulder. I straightened the suit before turning to shake his hand and congratulate him.

“And Azru?” I asked. “What is to become of her?”

He made a derisive noise. “Who cares! She’d fall in the gutter and no one would know the difference, she’s so ugly. Here, cigar? Come, celebrate with me.”

I smoked and thought of Azru. She would be the joke of careless men and women who hadn’t the wit to appreciate her sharp tongue, her detached and cutting intellect.

A shame, I thought. And not truly any of my business. I would fade back into the ether, into the stardust and cosmos, and be none the wiser until I was made flesh again by another unwitting prince.

Khosrow upset the pleasant haze of smoke ringing us and took me by surprise.

“Would you sleep with her, then?”

I blinked.

“Farrah? I thought that was what I had been doing all this time.”

"No," he said and leaned in close, conspiratorial. I discovered I did not like being so bodily near him and I itched to flee my host simply to buy inches of space to stuff between us. "I meant Azru."

"Whatever for?" I asked, drawing on the cigar. It tasted bitter and ashen. Like burnt offerings.

"You said yourself. Too much of your visitations can destroy a person. Sleep with her until she crumbles. I promised Farrah first wife status, and so she shall have it."

The prospect of seducing Azru filled me with an apprehension and terror I could not define.

Khosrow must have discerned it on my face and the ash grew long on the end of my cigar.

"Too ugly even for you, eh?"

I fumbled for a witty reply and discovered I was speechless.

"Do it anyway," he commanded, knowing it was not in my power to refuse.

I waited until the ember burned down to my teeth.

I found her in her familiar bedroom. I locked the door behind me and through the netting of her sleeping area I stalked like a tiger resplendent in my stripes. A peacock pulling each feather slowly open.

She heard the click of the door and looked up from her open book with a paper folded in her hands. She did not see me at first through the dim evening light and squinted.

"Khosrow?"

"It is not Khosrow," I whispered.

"Lilu!" Her face suffused with light to know I was there and she shut her book and set it aside in eager anticipation.

I unknotted my tie. I felt strangely naked before her while she was fully clothed in her *chador*.

I seated myself across from her and did not look at her.

"Lilu, you are troubled."

"I have been commanded to do you ill," I whispered.

“Oh? Well, look at that. And here I thought my husband surrounded himself with liars. You realize you won’t be able to accomplish whatever it is he wants you to do if you tell me about it beforehand?”

“I am an incubus,” I told her. “I was to wait until you were dreaming and come for you. Seduce you over and over relentlessly until there was nothing left of you. Inchoate and insensate. Flesh upon flesh and feeling without thought.”

She leaned way from me and sat up straight.

“I feel as though this is familiar,” she began, “like—”

“Like you’ve heard it before? I know. I’ve come to you before this. While you dreamt. No one remembers their dreams in passing. They only remember when I call night after night, when I mark them with mouth and hand. One must make an impression to be remembered in the morning.”

“But—” and now came the doubts and recriminations and the uncertainties creeping in with her questions and all tinged with the remnant of memory, of half-recollected dreams, and she fell into silence on her own.

“So you are like the demon I have heard tales of in my childhood? And read, in my youth?”

“Yes.”

“So why are you not seducing me now? Why are you here in the flesh when you might have waited for the sun to dip low, and the moon carve out your path to me? Under the cover of darkness?”

I clasped my hands in my lap and said nothing.

She clucked her tongue.

“Do you suppose,” she said gently, “that for someone whose existence is defined by touch—whose purpose is a never-ending sexual penetration, a never-ending seething lust—the highest expression of love would be a refusal to touch anyone at all?”

If I remain still, perhaps I might disappear. If I remain still, I think, perhaps my heart itself will stop and free me of the

this body and its heavy flesh.

"Lilu," she said, and reached a hand for mine where it lingered on the bedspread. I contracted my fingers away from her.

"I can't," I hissed. "*I can't.*"

And then I was gone and when I left the door hung by the hinges in the fury of my passage and everywhere the moans of unsatisfied desires erupting from every stranger who crossed my path; everything bled over from me like a throbbing ache and infected all living creatures around me. I did not care to look back and see how it might reel Azru; might send her backward upon the silk and with her mouth canted open, her eyes half-lidded and dreaming of me—whether I was there in spirit or not.

I did not tell Khosrow. And if he wondered that she was no worse for wear in the elapsing days with the wedding approaching, I did not enlighten him.

Khosrow bid me stay until the wedding night. I did not care for the nuptials but I accepted. I thought I might say goodbye to Azru before Khosrow decided to end my service and free me from the body. I bought her a book of poems and when I arrived at her room, no one was there.

"Where has she gone?" I asked the guard.

He shrugged. "She is no longer a resident at the palace."

"She's the first wife. Where else would she be?"

"You did not hear? She has been accused of adultery. As punishment she has been sent to be executed."

"Did they say who this wretch who shared in her fate was?"

"None were detained, sir."

"So soon," I murmured.

Khosrow's patience had been stretched; and unable to wait he took matters into his own hands. I unleashed a laugh on a bitter gust of wind. I had provided an excellent excuse.

He would sleep soundly in the belief she had committed adultery—with a demon, no less.

“Sir?”

I clenched the book so hard the spine broke. It fell to the floor in a flutter of pages. The guard did not struggle, at first. The first kiss made him woozy and drunken and he could not resist. When I had him pressed to the wall and groaning I drew my hands across his throat and cut him wide with the edges of my fingernails. Blood poured down the front of his service uniform and stained the pages of poetry meant for Azru.

I cast him aside and walked forth into her room. Every item as she left it and even the indent in the sheets ready and waiting to receive her body. I turned and the pungent odor of attar of rose and perfume drifted from the end table and when I turned, I saw it there: glass bottles and in the middle, the tear catcher she could not fill for Khosrow.

I plucked it from the table and held it up to the light.

A millimeter of liquid refracted a brief rainbow over my face.

She could not shed a tear for Khosrow. Of this, there could be no doubt, but in my palm the proof of a tear shed for a lowly demon.

I unstopped it and before I could stop myself, I drank. I tasted her, the hidden scents of her molecules and her atoms and her blood; the low vibrations of her, flush with the undernotes of her hidden sexuality and her intellect. All these delicious things captured in her tears like prisms of light.

It was then I swelled the fortress of my flesh. For while it held me like an anchor, my consciousness laid siege to the lands. In pure spirit I was enraged and spilling over onto the living world so wives attending their mundane tasks stopped where they stood on their way to prayer or in the midst of dining to be aroused by the fierce wind following in the wake of my passage. Lust on the wing. Husbands' pupils dilated

and compelled them to turn with open mouths as though to drink wine from a font; women sighing in ecstasy behind the closed doors of private rooms; the populace as a whole overcome with the fading influence of my transient presence. To be touched only briefly left them trembling and choking down the ancient language of want, of need, of desire, before coming back to themselves to recall their present and damp down the embers of their primacy, their fearsome want, leaving behind me a landscape of hushed men and women in afterglow.

All my focus narrowed to a pin-head as my demon self battered down the doors in search of Azru who could not hide from me or be stolen or diminished, searching with her scars and the flavor of her to guide me—until I found her like a bright point in a midnight sky, a northward star: my Azru, languishing in a dark prison room.

I retreated. As demon, I could come and go like the wind but in the end I had no choice but to return to the body Khosrow had bound me to; this would not help Azru. This was beyond my limits, now.

They would kill her, of course.

The vial fell from my fingers and broke against the stone as I began to laugh and laugh and I was still laughing when they arrested me and dragged me away.

“What happens next?”

The man looks from the ember of the cigarette to the guard. The guard leans against the table until the uneven chair leg sinks to the left and he sways with the motion as though he has done this countless times before.

The prisoner drops the glowing cigarette into the sandy floor. The butt extinguishes in the sand and a curl of smoke rises between them in a question mark. The guard taps the pruning shears against the table.

“You have to come back tomorrow for the rest.”

The guard snorts. "That's an old trick. So old it's almost a joke."

The captive shrugs. "Is another day too much to pay for a decent ending?"

"Just this once," the guard concedes, and leaves the prisoner to himself, intact and whole in the darkness.

The next day, a new guard enters. The setting is the same. The rickety table. The ominous layout of sinister tools.

"What happened to the guard from yesterday?" the captive asks.

"Strangest thing," the new guard says as he sips his morning coffee. "They found him dead this morning."

"Oh?"

"They say he died in a very dishonorable manner."

"Come now, my friend. Satisfy my curiosity. You are about to torture me. Surely you might grant a man such a kind mercy as to distract me from my worries?"

The guard laughed, a good man called into the service of a terrible employment.

"Well, it's said that he was pleasuring himself and decided to use a rope around his neck. And at the sensitive moment, he misjudged, and hanged himself in the throes of ecstasy."

"Did she?" the captive whispers. His gaze fades as though imagining the scene and stitching together the narrative with greater energy and his lips part.

"He, you mean," the guard corrects.

The captive recollects himself and his gaze flicks to the guard.

"Of course. I misspoke. Might I have a cigarette?" he asks.

The guard puts down his coffee with a long-suffering sigh and offers the prisoner one: and when they are ensconced in cigarette smoke, the captive begins to speak.

"You know how I got here, right?" he asks.

The guard shakes his head.

“Well, why don’t I tell you,” he suggests, “and if you know of Scheherazade, then you know what I am doing, what I am up to.”

Cain

Tanith Lee

He was born seven minutes before me, and lived for two. By the time I had begun to breathe, he was dead. We were identical, so alike that if he'd lived, no one could have told us apart. Miranda revealed all this many years later, one night when she was unusually, spectacularly drunk. But by then, of course, I knew him well.

One of my earliest memories is that I thought my name was Hill Town. Actually it's Hilton, like the old hotels. I can remember asking my mother why I had this name, and had we lived on a hill? She laughed and dismissed me; I was still at the entertaining but relatively unobtrusive stage. The Girl—always there was a Girl to look after me—took me away, down to the edge of the blue creaming sea. "Look, fishes!" said the Girl. And we watched dolphins, which sometimes came in so near the shore, leaping like gray silk balloons from the water.

The sea house was a large one, with white columns. In the garden were palms and enormous orange trees. But at other times we were in the city. I was taught at home by a succession of tutors. My remote father didn't believe in my mixing in the rough-and-tumble of real life before I had to. I was, needless to say, a lonely child. The Girls were pretty, and mostly tried, I think, to be kind. But in a way they resented me, this dark cute little kid who was swathed in so much money, when they and theirs had had to struggle. Always a problem with servants, I suppose, however well-treated or well-paid. And frankly, I'd imagine the Girls

weren't that well-treated or paid. My father gave some of them special attention, and then they left. I recall my mother, white as marshmallow, shouting in a lofty room, "Since the baby, you don't want me, do you?"

"Oh, Miranda," said my father, solid as granite to her sweet wobbling softness, "you're so impossibly self-centered. Why does it have to be about you? Couldn't I just fancy a change?"

I remember too Miranda's tall morning glasses of fruit juice and gin, which, as the day went on, altered to glasses of pure gin, with only an orange or lemon slice swimming there like a fish.

As the years passed, her marshmallow softness became spread on her more lavishly. But she was a beautiful woman, even large, a fat, white, pampered seal, with yearning coal-dark eyes. Do you sense I loved her? I don't know. I simply watched her. She was a glamorous being hung with jewels and glasses of alcohol, who normally inhabited the same buildings with me.

As I grew older, she became more interested in me—once she saw I was a male, that is, not simply a boy child. She would rub me down with a towel when I came out of the sea or the pool. She would brush my hair, take my face between her hands, and stare into my eyes. She called me her "handsome hound." "So streamlined and slender," she would say. "And such lovely heartless eyes!" At first I think I didn't dislike this. Then it embarrassed me. I can't recollect quite when my self-consciousness began. Around puberty I would think. There was nothing sexual in her actions, though sensual perhaps. But fondling had for me an amorous quality from the very first.

I said I was a lonely child, but that was in the day. I knew instinctively that my questions and conversations bored everyone. What to me was so new and odd was to them merely routine, beyond discussion. Yet also by day I was generally in the company of adults, my mother, sometimes

my father, the tutors, the Girls. At night, bathed and combed and put to bed in silk pajamas, the mosquito net drawn like a film of mist about the bed, the window showing in its long frame the indigo star-daubed vista of sea and sky, or the light-hives of a city without other stars—at night, I was alone. More alone than most. My father frowned on any toys that were not instructional, in some way intellectual; I was taught chess at seven. And so no furry, floppy companion shared my bed from the age of five. I'd cried when they took my bear and rabbit away. My father explained that I was too old for them, and that in the children's home to which they went, they were needed far more. He had always this habit, of abruptly seeing necessary benefits for others when he wanted to deprive his own family of something. (For example, the three Girls who were sent away would thereby lose their essential wages, bringing their kin to poverty—how was it my mother was oblivious to this? But she had obstinately continued oblivious.) However, my own horror was mitigated by the knowledge that my friends would be loved and housed.

I think six months elapsed before I replaced them.

How did it start? I had, when alone, talked to myself all that while, because I didn't interrupt myself, or criticize—or very little, something had come off on me from the adult world—and because I found my own voice not repellent or annoying as, very evidently, now and then others did. Somewhere in the preslumbering dark, lit by the blue sea window or the honeycomb of city lights, my talk began to be not to myself, but to another.

Children generally fall asleep quickly. Some nights I spoke for ten or fifteen minutes, on some for one or two. That sense that I was listened to was very definite. And presently, also the sense that this was a secret thing, which should be mentioned to no one else. But then, I wasn't a confessing child, had never been encouraged to be. *Tell mother. Your*

father wants to know. These were the phrases attendant on transgression, not invitations to confide.

Even had I confided, of course, my nocturnal chats, though doubtlessly disapproved, would have been safely enough categorized. I had, like so many lonely infants, an Imaginary Friend.

The Girl had slapped me during my bath. It was a hard slap, across my legs. I'd been splashing a lot. I don't know why. I was never a very boisterous child. The point, which I didn't then—I was eight—understand, was that she had on a gold lamé dress. She had fallen in love with my father and wanted to catch his eye, and to do this, pretending it was for some date she had after my bath, she had had to dress up first—he only came into my room for a few minutes before dinner. Inevitably, I'd splashed the dress. There was a wet patch on the inferior lamé, over her breast, which she'd wanted to sparkle. It looked like the map of Italy.

The slap hurt quite badly, perhaps because I was wet. She looked at its reddening formation on my thighs in terror. She said she was sorry, so sorry, but her boyfriend was so particular. "If señor ask," she said, "tell you slipped, yes?"

"Yes, all right."

"You are a good little boy."

In fact, my father never noticed, either the red slap or the map of Italy, or her gaudy clothing.

When they were all gone, I lay in bed, and rubbed my thighs where the sting had been. I told my Imaginary Friend what had happened. And it was then, then for the very first time, I felt him. Because he *touched* me. He touched the place where I'd been slapped. He caressed it, as soothingly as a mother, over and over, stroking me until I tingled. In the end, consoled, curiously excited, yet calm, I fell asleep; and as I did, I felt his arms holding me.

Why didn't I marvel at this? Why wasn't I alarmed? Everything is strange to a child. Very little makes any sense.

Why is the sky blue? Why must I eat now when I'm not hungry, and not now, when I am? Why are you angry with me simply because I'm here. None of these inquiries, mostly unvoiced, gets a proper answer.

And this—this was very nice. It was comforting, and I'd had no comfort at all. Even falling down in the sand on the beach, cutting my knee on a shell, a great fuss, painful antiseptic, a stitch put in by a scowling doctor—but no *comfort*. Be a brave boy.

Yes, this was nice. And half waking once, the sense that he was still there. Not seen, but warmly touching, holding me, coiled about me, and I about him, the way I had seen cats asleep on sunny walls.

Every night after that, he stroked me, and, leading my hands, led me to stroke him. He felt just like myself. Smooth and thin, almost snakelike, sleek. His hair was exactly the same longish length as mine, and smelled like mine, as his body did, of expensive soap and some child's cologne, of shampoo and sea and salt. Of flesh, too, of the warmth of hidden valves, extrusions, and crevices, with their tang of meat and spice.

I don't remember when he kissed me first. It was a gentle brushing thing. I think I must have been ten or so. His closed mouth had a whisper-scent of toothpaste, just like my own.

I'd call him by a name—I haven't said, have I? I left off using it later—which was a makeshift of my own, a childish anagram, *Holtni*. (Hold me?) But even then I never used this name to him, only when I thought about him by day, which now I often did. *I'll tell Holtni about that big car I saw. I'll tell Holtni Momma was sick and had to lie down. Or, Holtni will cuddle me*, because I hadn't done my mathematics very well, and my tutor shouted, saying I was a brainless little rich boy, as if *rich* were an obscenity—as, of course, it was.

But I recall the next events, when everything changed, perfectly well.

Puberty had commenced, but I didn't know. No one had really warned me. There had been a book, which had diagrams, telling, it seemed—I was bored and didn't try hard with it, there were so many dull books they made me read—only things I knew. That I had a penis, and two nipples, all three of which, like soldiers, might suddenly stand to attention. That was funny. I waited, but they didn't. Probably all a mistake, just the same as the idea I would be good at sport, while, aside from swimming, I could do nothing sporting at all. One of the tutors had attempted to give me a sex lesson, but for his own ends, I would guess, judging from his overnight dismissal—something to do with the young gardener.

I was twelve. I was in my mother's room. Sometimes I went there when she was absent. I had liked to feel her dresses and sniff them, to pry into cupboards, drawers. I found curious things. A box like a shell with a rubber thing in it like something out of the sea—appropriate enough, given the box. And once a carton of things like large cigarettes, but these were, once extracted, too white and ultimately bendy, and I couldn't see how you would light them. Luckily I never confided anything about these discoveries either. The notion of her preadolescent son routing among her diaphragm and tampons would have sent Miranda hysterical.

Her jewels intrigued me too. As a child I loved to see her in them. She was, for a second, like something from the Arabian Nights (doubtless the expurgated version), leaning to kiss me good night, smelling of *Les Yeux du Noir*, her neck and ears lambent with cool, flashing emeralds, inflamed rubies, or the gold cross set with three diamonds between her breasts. The jewel boxes were sometimes locked, but she was forgetful. It was not until I was fifteen that I learned that these were all copies. The real gems were worn only once or twice a year.

One can say that I had a sexual craving that stemmed from my mother, from her attributes—garments, ornament—more than her body, her *self*.

This must be so, because that day in her room I was moved to strip, and look at myself in her pier glass, where I could see all of me.

My theory then for doing it was that my own mirrors were either not full length, or in different places. My body seemed to me much larger and broader, and I wanted an overview.

Whatever, my clothes came off and I stepped naked to her glass, standing there on the deep carpet in the shining sunlight of the sea house. And here I was, Hilton.

I knew I was handsome. People remarked on it, and I had come to recognize what they pointed out. The large dark eyes and long lashes, the thin straight nose, the thick straight brows and thick straight hair. A long and narrow physique, long-legged, the shoulders widening. Clear skin mildly tanned from the days at the beach, the white band only about my loins, where, in a black thicket, the snake lay like a little velvet trunk. As I looked, I thought *Holtni's like me, so he too looks just like this. Even though I've never seen him. I'll tell him how I've looked at me. I'll ask him.*

As I said it, a blush went up my face, dark red. And my entire body quickened. I felt a wonderful, shameful, under-earth pressure. My blood was full of spangles and darts and up it rose, that velvet trunk, thickening and pushing, straight up, as the diagram in the awful book had foretold.

I put my hand on it in astonishment, and a shudder of the darkest, most intense feeling went through me. I shut my eyes and played with myself, opened them and stopped. I could feel something building in me, from the base of my spine to the crown of my head, the soles of my feet. It scared me. It was like running along a corridor, and knowing at the end there must come an opening and a colossal leap—but into what?

I turned my back on my image that was also the image of Holt-ni-Hold-Me. I put on my clothes, forcing my deflating erection inside like a naughty animal.

Then I went for a long walk along the beach, drank a Coke at a café I was forbidden, watched other boys, the kind I'd never met, throwing a ball in the paint-blue water.

Very carefully, I didn't think one thought about bed, nighttime, anything like that.

In any case, there was a dinner party that evening, and I was expected to be there for the first part of it. My father, utterly indifferent to me as a person, liked to show me off as a valuable possession. I was well-trained, polite, and, if not witty or skillful, at least graceful in my reticence. I said very little but listened attentively. Guests tended to exclaim that I was a model son.

The evening passed. Miranda wore a green Lavinché gown, and, as ever, got enormously drunk, showing not too many signs of it, she and her body being so accustomed to the state of drunkenness. My father moved among his friends and business acquaintances. Two daughters of some politician, thirteen and fifteen, seemed both quite interested in me. Flattered and uneasy, I sat between them at dinner, eating decorously the iced soup and squab, the skulls of white meringues. One girl, the fifteen year old, told me quietly I was beautiful enough to kiss. If I could find an excuse to leave the party and come on to the balcony, where night-blooming jasmine made a canopy, she'd show me how.

I didn't want to go, and therefore felt I must. My father had always insisted I behave impeccably with his guests.

Outside, the night was full of perfumes and murmurs, the sea, distant music from the little orchestra, laughter and talk.

The girl drew me in under the jasmine. She was one inch taller than I, but this was no problem. She pressed her lipsticked mouth to mine, and slid her tongue among my

teeth. Presently we clung together; I, because she clung to me.

At last she drew back. "Not bad. You're a wicked boy. You've been with a woman, I bet."

I said nothing. I had gathered, from literature alone, that to go with a woman was my destiny and function, a cause for congratulation, as with successful schoolwork.

She reapplied her lipstick, pinched my bottom, and went back in to the party.

Soon after, at about eleven, it was suggested to me surreptitiously by the current Girl that I should go to bed.

As I climbed the stairs, nothing about the politician's daughter stayed with me. Although I knew the rising of my flesh was directly connected with what she had done and said, I had felt no connection as it occurred. I had not come erect, and, indeed, had known enough to ease back from her, as if to stop her feeling what in fact had not happened.

Even so, I was now disturbed. For in my bed waited my intimate companion.

By now, I'd decided that my own powers of the imagination had made him seem so real for me. Beginning to reason, having been made to do it by my various teachers, I'd awarded him at last the license of My Fantasy. That I was homosexual, oddly, did not occur to me. Until this particular night, I hadn't once equated his caresses and my own with anything other than true companionship.

In my bedroom, however, I began to know differently.

No sooner was the door shut than my penis started to move independently. I'd already bathed before dinner. Now I went to shower and ran it chill. But this did nothing, save to tone me up, and so excite me more.

I climbed into bed naked, in the dark, trembling with a terror old as life, already hot again, my lips parted.

He met me at once, my Imaginary Friend, My Fantasy, Hold Me. He coiled his arms about me and dragged me down, fierce as a lion, his nails scraping and plowing my

shoulders and my lower back. He rubbed himself against me, and I found we dueled, for he, invisible as night, tangible as flesh, was as erect as I. But he knew things I did not. He was tickling my balls, running a finger up and down my spine, kissing me not as the sticky lipstick girl did, but sucking my tongue and my breath right out of me. He exquisitely tortured my penis until I thought I'd choke and lose consciousness, but instead finally I came, exploding in his phantom hand, a shower of silver needles, a gush of syrup and wine.

No sooner did it happen than I began to cry. Then, getting up, I ran to the bathroom and puked out all the exotic dinner.

When I returned, I expected him to be there, to comfort me as in the past. But now, for the very first time, my friend was gone.

He returned. I'm sure you worked that out. He was there the next night, and the next. Initially, I tried to find excuses not to go to bed. I'd sit reading in the rocker by the window. Or I'd watch my TV. Sometimes, seeing the light on, or hearing the television at one o'clock, the Girl would knock and come in, dressed in her skimpy kimono. "Bad boy—you go to sleep now. What will señor say if I tell?"

So in the end I had to sit there in the dark. And once, when she knocked and opened the door, had to pretend I'd been visiting the bathroom.

I took to locking my door. When she knocked then, and rattled, which once or twice she did, I didn't answer. In the morning, she chided me, and I said, "Yes, you woke me up. Father isn't going to like that, is he?"

In any case, whatever I did, unless I slept all night in the chair, I must eventually go to bed. And then, after a few moments, or even immediately, My Fantasy would catch hold of me. He was only sometimes insidious. Usually he overwhelmed me at once, his arms round me, his hands on

me, his tongue at my lips. But I was ready anyway. I'd sat in the chair for two hours, nursing my engorgement. Sometimes within a minute of his irresistible strokes, I erupted, whimpering into his unseen yet smothering body. Two or three times, he surprised me, was not there. Then I would thrash about, my face a furnace, the bursting sausage of desire twitching in my own unpracticed grip. And then he would steal over me, shivering fingers along my buttocks, under my ear. He would draw me against his body, massaging my belly, licking my neck, his other hand riding me forward over the edge into the scarlet abyss of orgasm.

I stopped resisting. I simply got into bed without delay and put out the light, and gave myself up, gasping with uncontrollable eagerness.

Once he had had me, I slept. He let me, holding me close. I never ran away again and he never again deserted me. Now and then, generally between three and four in the morning, the window lightening like a pearl, he would wake me . . . That is, I thought, I would wake myself, stiff again, and sometimes then he would take me in his mouth. The bliss of this caused me the first time to scream. Nobody arrived to investigate. I would have said it was a nightmare. I knew, switching on a lamp, they would see no one but me, my nudity safe under the wet sheet and through the mist of net.

Not until I was almost fifteen did he ease me on to my stomach, and with glorious, melting intrusions, culminating in cannon thrusts, bugger me. I thought I would die of that. I bit my pillow, my saliva mingling with tears and sweat. The orgasm was like death, and, in the morning, I expected to be crippled, disfigured, but everything was apparently the same, save for one tiny drop of blood, my virginity, that I blamed on a bite.

You would probably ask me if I truly still thought by now that I did all this myself, merely through an overactive imagination, and some unlikely contortions of my own body?

What can I say? I'd given up. Reason had never been much use in my life. The rules of my daytime world were set, irksome, and unimportant. I longed for and expected nothing. And, by then, I had read of the incubus, the male demon that fastens on hapless sleepers, drawing out their life. I had the attentions of an incubus, then. The fashionable pious religion my parents had once tried to introduce left me unmoved, and I doubted all the messages of the Church. Anyway, they were wrong. I felt no weakness. And he was my friend of long standing. He asked nothing, only my random caresses, my blind pleasure. And the pleasure—it was so incredible, it was now my drug. As easy to wean Miranda from her tumblers of gin.

In fact, Miranda was easier. A few days after my fifteenth birthday, following a particularly brilliant public fiasco in an opulent shop of the city, Miranda collapsed. Soon she was in a detoxification clinic, the alcohol all sucked out of her, having to face reality head-on and alone.

She looked, no pun intended, like a mummy, when I saw her a month later. She'd lost too much weight too quickly. Without drink she had no appetite, as she told me, and in detail, constant stomach cramps, flatulence, sensations of asphyxia, headaches, joint pains, nausea, and spots in her vision. The doctors insisted all this was doing her good; but, she petulantly and pathetically mumbled, weeping strengthless tears, she felt so ill.

What could I do? My father looked at her grim-faced, told her she was paying the price for her foolishness, then took me away. A month after that, she was returned to us, walking with a stick on shaking white pumps, in an awful bright cheerful mauve dress that made her look ninety.

She began after this to take an interest in charity work. Someone, perhaps a priest, had told her to have more care of others than herself, and that this would help her. Possibly it did. She ate little, but constantly drank juices, sodas,

bottled water. Sometimes she would binge on chocolate, but this brought on agonizing migraines. She'd never smoked, but now talked about taking it up. My father warned her that he detested nicotine on the hands and breath of women. Which must have been a lie, because his latest mistress, the daughter of a tobacco magnate, smoked thirty to fifty cigarettes a day.

Miranda kept away from strong drink for five years. I don't know how she managed this feat. Every day she seemed thinner and more brittle. She had developed, despite the thinness, a large stomach, a light cough, and some strange type of eczema, always hidden in bandages that now and then showed under her sleeves. None of these ailments every responded to any treatment. She did more and more charity work, then less and less. Sometimes she'd say, "Thank God I gave up drinking. I'm so much better now." The doctors seemed to have taught her to repeat this, like a magical mantra. But it didn't work.

Meanwhile, I was brought steadily into my father's world—dinners, concerts, receptions. He seemed to want me to make up my mind what I wished to do. But I wished to do nothing in particular. In a curious rush, I can't describe it any other way, and can't linger over it, all at once I was twenty. He made a decision for me. I was to go into a junior partnership in the firm of some friend. It had to do with travel and imports—I couldn't have cared less. But as always, my façade of polite attention, my good looks, my apparently superior education—this last a complete myth, for I'd learned practically nothing, and had no application or ambition—saw me well-received in the spurious job. It was all right, in its way. The pretty secretaries ogled me, and a couple of men. But I was suitably aloof. There was nothing unprepossessing in the work, which consisted actually of nothing. And, I had my nights to look forward to, as I'd greedily looked forward to them now for years.

Soon I was sent on a series of missions to wine and dine eminent clients. This, evidently, I was excellent at.

Returning from one of these jaunts, rather drunk, ironically, I found the city house in turmoil. Miranda had been taken seriously ill and rushed to hospital.

She was in a large white room, surrounded by banks of flowers and bulbous, undersea-looking tubs of oxygen. She sat bolt upright on her pillows, and she was smiling as I hadn't seen her smile for five years. The cause was obvious. On the bedside table stood two magnum bottles of the most expensive and cloudy gin. She'd bribed one of the nurses, and, the times being what they were, the nurse had obliged.

No one else was there.

"Hallo, handsome," she said to me. "Pull up a chair. Have a drink."

"I've been drinking all evening. Should you—"

"It doesn't matter now," she said. "I'm going to die in a couple of weeks."

I was, despite everything, despite my own utter self-centered callousness, shocked. At fifteen, when she was in the clinic, I can't recall being very concerned. I thought her collapse was a plea for my father's notice. But to *die* to get it would be, even for Miranda, a bit extreme.

"Surely that's not so."

"It is so. Have this." She passed me another toothglass of the gin. It was sweet and poisonous. I almost gagged, but got some down. "You're pale, Hilton. Does that mean you care?"

"Of course I care."

"I'm your mother," she said. "Well. There we are. I've got something else in there now. As big as a melon, he said. Did he? Was it a peach? Something appetizing. Absolutely no symptoms, except all the other foul things I've had for years. I just thought it was that. One more pain to put up with. Do

you know, he said my liver was quite good. My kidneys too. It's *this* that's going to do it. So. Here's to *Life!*"

I wanted, being me, to run away at once. But how could I? My father was untraceably with one of his women. And no one else had bothered to come, or she hadn't wanted them. The flowers were all they could manage, a call to a top-class florist. They'd do the same for her funeral.

She was very, very drunk. The alcohol, after the space of abstinence, had hit her like a tidal wave. Maybe she'd also been given morphine. She looked happy, almost radiant, her thin face flushed and her eyes limpid with the gin. She didn't seem afraid.

"I want to tell you something, Hilton," she said. "Your father'd never speak about it. I had no one to tell!—oh, except I had a counselor, but he kept insisting to me what I felt: Now, señora, you feel *this*, don't you? Or, you must experience the hurt, it mustn't go in but come *out*. And I said, But I don't feel hurt. I feel dirty. There's been a murder inside me. Dirty? he said, Murder? As if I'd confused him. And when I tried to explain, I couldn't get to it, and he corrected me, No, no, it was *hurt* I felt. And then later I thought, So what? I've got a child. I managed that."

"Mother, I'm sorry. I don't understand."

That was when she told me.

She did so in vast, almost technical detail. How the labor pains began when she was in the bath, and she had to be lifted out. And then the private plane, the flight to the hospital, and how she'd given birth, and then given birth again.

"They hadn't known, Hilton. It wasn't the way it is now. And—this is a primitive place, Hilton. Two babies. Two little sons. You—and *him*."

I was the second of a pair of twins. Younger by seven minutes. Even as she was screaming and ejecting me, they were slapping him and trying to keep him alive.

“But they couldn’t, Hilton. He just folded up like a gray flower and died. There was no proper reason. They said I should just never have had two babies. One had overcome the other. One was too weak, the other too strong.” She drank more gin. She said, “You were so like each other to look at. Identical. No one could have told you apart, except *you* were alive. And if he’d lived . . . I used to think you would have played jokes on all of us. You know, the way it is in Shakespeare—” (she pronounced it, drunk, *Shazpure*. For some reason, I remember that very well. *Shazpure*) “—he’d pretend to be *you*, and you’d play terrible games with girls. And you’d be inseparable.”

We are, Mother, I thought. I drank all the gin in the glass, retched uncontrollably, got a grip. I said, “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“What was the point? I mean. What was the *point*?”

She leaned back, and her face drooped. “I think I’ll have a little sleep, Hilton. Be a good boy and run along. Your father’ll be here in half an hour. The nurse said.”

Her glass fell from her hand, but it didn’t matter, it was empty. She snored softly, and I thought of the cancer in her womb, where we had been, he and I, and I’d crushed the life out of him.

When I stood up, the room spun, and I went into her bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. The nurse, I could tell, seeing me come out, thought that the drops were tears.

That night, I didn’t go to bed. I went to a nightclub and drank and smoked dope. In the morning, I was so sick I didn’t notice, and fell asleep on the bathroom floor.

It was always in a bed he had me. Always there. Why? Did he only remember the labor-ward bed, or was the coffin, the little tiny white coffin he must have had, like a bed? And nighttime. Darkness.

I kept out of bed, all beds, even a hammock. Slept in chairs, mostly at the hospital, surrounded by harsh lights and muttering people. She went quicker than they said, as if she ran away. She died after three days.

In the mêlée of the next two weeks, the calls, the letters, the servants running to and fro, the ghastly arrangements for a death, it was simple to evade. Even to stop thinking.

The funeral was a classy affair. My father wore his blackest suit and threw a rose into her grave. He abstained from his mistress for a week. God knows why. She certainly didn't, and called him twice, pretending to the servant she was a "friend of the señora's."

In the end, I went and lay on my bed. It was afternoon, and I felt safe. I'd wake again before the darkness came. But I didn't wake, not until the city window of my adult bedroom was patched by black sky and bee-gold lights, and then he was there, beside me.

"I didn't know," I said. "You know I didn't know." Talking to him, as I always had when a child. I'd talked to him far less in recent years, only gasps and demands, begging him to go on, do more. "Do you hate me? This isn't hate, is it?"

He put his long formed finger inside me, and moved there. My back arched at once, well taught. His weight on me, and he tongued my nipples while the other hand cupped my genitals and I swelled. His breath burned my chest, my face. He probed my mouth hungrily. I couldn't speak. The mounting sensation, the unavoidable, was rushing up my spine. On my side, his hand rubbing me even as he edged, twitched, became enormous inside my body.

"Wait—was it my fault—*wait*—"

But he wouldn't wait. Now he clove me in long pounding drumbeats and his fingers skidded on the engine of my seed. The world was going to blow up and I couldn't stop. I gripped the bed and spasmed, my bowels, my belly, my

penis, my lungs. I heard my howl, half disembodied. I thought the rollers of it would never stop.

He's killing me, I thought, even as I bucked and grunted in ecstasy. Killing me, as I killed him.

I felt empty when it was over. I lay half off the bed. His weight, his body, were gone.

"Don't go. Listen to me. Can you hear me? Do you hear? What are you? *What?* Are you—the one she said—"

But there was nothing in the dark.

He woke me between three and four, tickling the entrance to my body. I had lain awake petrified for three hours, slept for one. Now I tried to fight him off. He paid no attention. He took me in his mouth and all my fear and rage slipped from me as constellations shot through that tiny orifice that knows so much.

And then he was gone once more. He wouldn't stay—to listen. Probably he had never hear me, was deaf and dumb. He was *dead*, after all. He only wanted to do this.

Did it matter? Christ, I'd come to like it so, to rely on it. In all my idiotic life, this was all that was of any real use. It asked nothing but my delight. A lovely present for me at the end of every oh-so-trying day.

And it hadn't hurt me. My last medical showed me fit and strong, as they always did.

What then? Was it revenge? What was it? A demon, a ghost? Should I attempt an exorcism?

I slept, exhausted. I think I felt him in the dark, holding me. Maybe I only dreamed it.

Months followed. I did nothing but work. I slept rather a lot in chairs. I wondered if a hotel room would free me. In the past, he'd come to me in the houses of my—our—father. What was his name? They must have had him posthumously christened or blessed—

I began to feel I might be going mad, and my couth, controlled exterior only proved this all the more to me. No

one could get inside me (but for my sodomous ghost-lover). I was a dummy from a shop window. Hollow within.

(Now and then I went into my bed. There he always found me. I dreaded it, wanted it. I had, after all, nothing else of any interest in my life.)

I had more sense than to confront my father on the matter of my dead twin. But I went finally to the priest who had, haphazardly, received Miranda.

He tried at first to be kind to me, but I, logically, was suspicious. Did he see me as reconverting back into the faith?

I said, "My mother told me, just before her death, that when I was born—"

"Yes?" he said. His face was bland.

"That there was another child, who died, after only two minutes."

"She told you this?"

"Yes. I think she felt guilty, for some reason."

"She'd used contraception in the past," said the priest. "It weighs heavily on some women, to break the commandments of the church."

I growled at him, but not outwardly. I said, "Was he named?"

"My dear son, I don't know. You seem troubled." How could he see what no other could? "Why not tell me the real root of your problem?"

I intended to get up and walk out. The slums of the city seethed with diseased and ruined girls who did not break the Church's commandments, and filled the world with unwanted, ill-treated brats.

But I heard myself blurt, "I dream about it. About *him*. He won't leave me alone. Since I was a child—"

What on earth was wrong with me? I hadn't minded, had I, until just now? Until she let me know, twenty years too late, that I was preyed upon by an undead brother?

Then I saw my panic, clear as a picture rising up in developing fluid. I saw how everything had changed.

The priest rose as I, belatedly did. He put a restraining hand on my arm.

"Hilton, my son. I have something to say. God made us, and we have duties to God. To ignore them is unwise."

"What—"

"Please listen a moment. You're of an age, my son, when I'd expect you either to have sought the priesthood—or a woman."

I stood there and gaped at him. I was cold with horror at what I'd suddenly seen to be my existence. That nothing mattered save my nights in the arms of death. To be sucked off and wanked and bugged by death. Disgust, *despair*—both, doubtless, sins.

Then, out of sync, I heard what he'd said.

"You mean I should be involved with a woman?"

"With your father's consent, of course. And with the idea of a true union, a marriage. At your age, what could be more natural? Let me assure you, Hilton, it will get rid of any such nightmares as you've described."

I almost laughed. I stopped myself. I *hadn't* described them. In ancient times, I'd have gone to him, confessed all, been laid out naked before an altar, and flogged to get the devil out of me. Now, this.

Into his hand, I put the money I'd brought (for the orphans), and went away. My head was buzzing. I had an incoherent memory of that lipstick-girl on the balcony, and of the Girls my father had seduced.

Was it so simple? Was it even possible now? I'd never felt anything for a woman. But then, I'd felt nothing for a man, either, or for any human thing, save myself. And him.

The evening was gathering in golden polluted clouds on the city. I stood on the steps of the church, staring at the lines of hooting traffic, the flying birds, the glassy towers that touched the sky.

I was frightened, wasn't I? Even ecstasy had become fearful to me. I was in thrall to an incestuous ghost. And going to a priest, had I been given a solution?

Standing there, I felt helpless. And I laughed out loud at the hopeless mathematical equation which, as always, I couldn't solve at all.

Two days later, I saw Meraida. Her name has a structure like my mother's, but I only became aware of that much later. I'd left my smart office, ignoring the face of my errand-boy assistant, and gone out personally for aspirin. Then walked into a café to swallow them with coffee.

She was sitting at a table, alone. She wore a white short sleeveless dress that revealed a flawless, almost Martian, tan. Her hair was blue-black and gleamed like silk, falling to her waist, but so thick it was combed straight back without a parting. When she leaned forward to drink her cordial through a straw, I saw the honey tops of her breasts. Maybe I was looking for it, but I had a reaction. Very slight, but definite. I put down my cup and imagined cupping instead one of those full high girl breasts, naked in my hand. The response was immediate. It was as if I'd only been holding it back all these years, the way a celibate is supposed to.

Presently I got up, went over, and sat down at her table. She looked up without affront or dismay. I was used to women gazing at me. She had a triangular, small-boned face, slanting eyes of a hazel that matched her tan. She'd used no make-up, needed none, only a crimson lip gloss that looked as if she'd wet her mouth with strawberries.

"You're wonderful," I said. I'd never bothered to learn any technique for women. What they wanted, after all, seemed fairly obvious.

She blinked. Her lashes were black and silky as little wings. "So are you."

"That's a very good start," I said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Yes, all right. I like these."

We sat and talked all afternoon. (Mostly about her, I made sure of that.) She was an art student, but she didn't mind missing her classes for me. I let her know, without quite saying, the walk of life I came from. She could see for herself the suit and shirt and shoes and watch, the Escurier gold ring. I had money all over me. But I think she'd have settled for me anyway, even if I'd come in off a road gang.

I could tell she thought we'd go somewhere almost at once, and she was willing. Young women are now so free. But naturally that wasn't what I required. So we walked in the public gardens, and sat by the fountain. About five, I called in to my partners, and stressed I was laid low by a migraine. Then I took Meraida for drinks and an early dinner.

She ate a lot, but very nicely, and drank a reasonable amount. I told her she should have topaz and amber in her ears, to match her eyes, and she laughed and said she'd never had a man talk to her the way I did, I was too accomplished, and she ought to go at once. So then I took her hand and said I was falling in love with her.

For a moment she looked quite frightened, and then her face turned into a child's at birthday time. She couldn't believe her luck. This handsome, if slightly unbalanced, rich young man, besotted with her as no doubt others more humble had been, trustingly telling her so.

"But you don't know me," she said.

"I've always known you," I said. (Dialogue is easy, if one keep one's head and has read a few novels.)

"No, but I mean, I mean, my father's a truck driver."

"So what?" All the better. In this city, he'd consent quicker to almost anything.

"You seem so serious about this."

"I am."

"If we make love," she observed, skeptical, "then you'll cool off."

"You don't understand. I think I want to spend my life with you."

"There's no need to lie."

"I'm not lying, Meraida." And I almost wasn't.

When we left the restaurant, again she expected I would take her at once to a hotel. But I stood her on a darkened avenue, and put my hand behind her head and felt her silky hair, and kissed her slowly, the way he had taught me. And again, that shivering burning upsurge. But I let her go.

"Don't you want—"

"Not yet. You see, I'm sure. But how could you be? We'll wait a while. Get to know each other better."

She was so disappointed, she glared at me, then smoothed her face. "I think you're playing a game."

"I'll call you tomorrow at eight, before you leave for college."

She shrugged, trying to be brave. "I won't expect it. It was a lovely evening."

I caught her to me again, swept her literally off her feet, and kissed her, tasting wine and brandy and her own clean mouth. Of course, she let me touch her breasts, fleetingly. Unlike the politician's daughter, Meraida could feel me hard as a stone, pressing into her belly.

She refused a taxi, and I could sense her looking back at me as we walked away from each other. I did not look back.

In the morning, at eight, I called her. She picked up the receiver after half a second. She was breathless.

"Is it you, Hilton?"

For a week, I courted her. I myself wanted to be sure, and I wanted her to be desperate. By the second outing, under the night-black trees of the gardens, I had my hand inside her low-cut black dress. My urgency reassured me, as did hers. He had taught me such a great deal, that she writhed and nearly reached a climax in my arms. She begged me, almost tearful. Couldn't we go somewhere? But I denied her. Not yet. Oh no.

It was more than cunning. (And cowardice, too, let's not forget that; I was, with human beings, a virgin.) I'd thought

long and searchingly about some luxurious hotel. Champagne, orchids, possessing Meraida on a milk-white bed, her screams piercing the golden chandelier filament in the ceiling. I'd thought about it as I shifted in the upright chair, the armchair, striving for a little sleep. For I never now used my bed. (And imagined him invisibly coiled there, imagined what he'd do to me if he got hold of me, until, once or twice, between the memory of my ghost-brother and the new fantasies of a living girl, I haphazardly came anyway.) I'd decided, the hotel test wasn't a fair one. It was true, he might not be able to attempt me in some other place . . . or he might. But in the family houses, the city house, the pillared house by the sea, there he was certain, and there he must be driven off by my woman's presence.

What he would do, what would occur, I had no idea. But he had never been with me when others were. And he had never had any competition, saving that one time on the balcony when I was twelve, which hadn't counted.

My father was going to New York. He would be gone a month. I'd take Meraida to the sea house. She'd love it. We'd swim and eat exotic meals. In the afternoons, we'd walk the hills and the town or lie on the beach. At night—*only at night*—we'd go into my bedroom, spread ourselves out on my bed, and commence the athletics of desire.

Obviously, once I'd told her we were going there, once she'd said yes—it took her three seconds, this time—I began to suffer a little gnawing worry. I was totally inexperienced with women, and no amount of antics elsewhere, or even those clever novels, could teach me everything. I was partly afraid of proving myself to be a fool. But then she was so primed, so willing, she'd do half the work for me. My body was fine, I was fit. She wanted me, and I, to my continued, amazed, smug reassurance wanted *her*.

It might happen she'd pall, or we'd tire of each other, or she might fret for the marriage I'd never be allowed to offer. But then I could wave, or buy, her off. My father, the

veteran, would know exactly how to handle it. Conversely, if I wanted to be safe from *him*, I would continue with Meraida until another, better, proposition came my way. And maybe, seeing how gorgeous she was, this would last forever. Some women didn't mind the role of mistress, especially not when cared for. It wasn't that I loved her. And yet I felt, if she were to save me, I might come to. I wanted to be saved. I was afraid of him, by now. Afraid of all the feverish joys I'd had with him. It wasn't that I believed in the soul, or in Hell, or divine punishment—nothing like that. It seemed to me he'd taken something from me, not only normal *live* sex, but a normal life of any kind. God knew what I might have been if I hadn't been possessed by my dead and deathly twin. He'd had no life, he'd pushed and pulled me away from my own. In the chairs now I had nightmares. He was looming over me, seen in dreams as never before, a gray mass like a colossal amoeba. He was poking bits of himself into every crack and hole, and laughing in a soundless, seething way as I submerged, not in ecstasy, but drowning.

It was filthy, what had been. It wasn't what I should have had. Who *was* I? What had I lost. Only Meraida and her body could reveal the state of my potential for rescue or abandonment.

And it might be, it might be, despite everything—I might not be able. From this concluding possibility, I recoiled in an icy sweat. And every sexual spasm that took me unawares, I cursed, because I needed to save up my ardor. I needed to be bursting with it, like a ripe gourd.

The sky was hot velvety blue as we were driven to the coast. She liked the chauffeur, the car, the picnic hamper, and the wine. She liked the changing landscape as the city fell away, and talked about wanting to paint it, with that one white cloud there, just posing on that stand of eucalyptus . . .

Inevitably, too, the house impressed her. We had a ritual tea on the terrace overlooking the palms and orange trees of

the garden. It still surprised me slightly, all she could eat. I made up the balance by picking at the food. I was well and truly nervous by now. I needed a drink, but must watch that too.

We walked on the beach in the evening rosiness, and the glassy pink sea came in and laved her bare feet. She laughed and skipped like a child. But I, looking at her beauty in the gold-brown dress I'd bought her, felt old as her grandfather. What lay in store for me?

The painted dining room set her off again, and dinner—she still eating heartily, I still leaving almost everything, reaching for the wine and cognac, tasting, putting them carefully aside—passed in a sort of whirl of fuss and excitement.

It came to me finally she too might be a little nervous. After all, I'd built it up so, kept her frustrated, all on edge. And I might, for all she knew, have strange tastes. Well I *had*, hadn't I?

I showered in one of the guest bathrooms while she lay in a tub of bubbles en suite to my bedroom. I looked at myself in the mirror, and saw only what I knew. Most heterosexual women would like me. There was nothing I needed to hide—physically . . .

Trembling with sudden fear, I sat down on the chair, and took a swig from the whiskey bottle I'd brought in. Not too big a swig, caution, for God's sake! So much rested on this. *Everything* rested on it.

When I went into the bedroom, she was lying on my bed. I think some magazine or book (shades of myself), had told her to arrange herself in a provocative way. She wore a semitransparent black slip reaching to her ankles, yet slit along one thigh. It had wired-up lace cups that lifted and nearly spilled her breasts. Her hair spread everywhere. She smelled of roses and cinnamon, and, through the black silk and lace, I could see the blacker nest of her center.

The surge came. I rose, as they say, to the occasion. The relief of it almost made me yell aloud. Instead, I told her she was lovely, and crossed the floor quickly, dropping my robe as I did so. It seemed I was to be saved.

An hour later, after she had gone away into the bathroom and come back, I think after crying a little, she said, “Is it something—have I done anything—?” She was very young. Younger even than I was, in many ways, by a thousand years.

“No, I’m sorry. It’s my bloody fault. I must have drunk too much at dinner. Or I’m tired.”

We sat at either end of my bed, mulling these inanities over.

Because, of course, you guessed, didn’t you, that despite my flood of arousal, once in contact with her, once called upon to perform the supreme conjunction, my confidence and will left me, my tower fell. Flaccid and humiliated, I tolled around with her for twenty, forty minutes, allowing her to try and stimulate me back to size, kissing her with an increasingly dry unwilling mouth. Until at last we fell apart, worn out by the hopelessness of it.

No, it wasn’t nerves or booze. It was initially the bed you see. This was so obvious, and I’d never thought . . . the bed, the very bed where I *had* to have her, in order to dismiss my haunting. In that bed, in *my* bed, my body came alert *only for him*. For the feeling of his hands and his fleshy surfaces, that were identical to my own. I mean, *identical*. He’d taught me impeccably. I was *trained*. No other man, let alone woman, could provide what I needed. And Meraida was—useless.

By the time I let her go, and she me, both of us sweating, pale, sickened, I wanted only to throw myself, or her, from the window. But it wasn’t *her* fault.

Even without the bed . . . safe from the ultimate performance, in a park, or an avenue, I’d been able to deceive us both. Oh, I might say I’d try to take her on the

floor, against a wall, *tomorrow morning*—but even there and then, even in the much-mooted hotel, it would eventually come down to this. Even without the bed. For *he*—he was my bed, and I was his. And without that, only so far could I go.

She and no one—but he—was my twin. She and no one—but he—was the ghost of my brother. My incubus. Death. Darkness. In the end, we put out the lights, and she had modestly drawn the curtains and the window was black, the room black, as pitch. We stretched out, not touching, and she fell asleep before I did. It was a big bed.

I thought, at least she would keep him away for this one night. But I knew then it wasn't true, and I lay sodden and still, waiting, until I felt him put his first light finger on my spine.

Then everything came back. Everything I had tried to build with her. I resisted. I resisted for my very life. But, of course, it was as useless to fight him as it had been to attempt anyone *but* him.

His hands were on all of me, as it seemed, at once. Under my ears, my armpits, my groin. Stroking at my balls, and coaxing my penis, licking my lips, teasing my nipples, unbearably tickling at every sensitive juncture and plain, invading me, filling me up. I'd never gone without him so long—and also I had never known him to be so powerful, so devastating, and he bent my back like a bow, rocking me toward oblivion. As the cosmos disintegrated in my brain and I stifled my own screaming with my fists, I vaguely heard Meraida, four feet away, whimpering shrilly in her sleep.

In the morning, when I woke, dazed, debilitated as if after some fit, I heard her singing in the shower. Dismal, I lay planning how to evict her from my life. At least she was in a happy mood, absurdly had “got over it.” Maybe she expected me to be better now and that we should try again,

and I'd have to be angry, make up some crime or theatrical idiocy or illness, in order to shunt her off. I was dreading it.

But when she came in, she simply stood, naked and very, very pretty, glowing in the muffled curtained morning sunlight.

I heard her say to me then, that which I heard after, several times (several times, before I truly learned and ended all such times, and went back alone into the dark), from the old and the young, the ugly and the sublime, from a couple more women, and from a few men too:

"Oh, Hilton. It was so amazing! I was half asleep, but what you *did* to me . . . I never knew it could—like *that*. And the things you did! My God, oh my God! I couldn't even see you in the dark, but you felt so good. Oh God, Hilton, I never came like that before. *Never*. Oh God, Hilton, you're the most wonderful lover in all the world!"

Given to the Sea

E. L. Kemper

Blood on the sheet—a bright continent against crisp, four-hundred thread-count cotton—stopped her breath. One foot froze in the act of burrowing into her slipper.

Joe was gone already. So was the last trace of his heat on the mattress. Linda had lain with her eyes closed—her nightmare retreating on a rustle of wings, phantom bruises lifting—as Joe crept from bed, leaving the light out while he dressed for work. Now she wouldn't have to worry about him until he came home for dinner. They would eat facing the TV, then he would go to his office and close the door. Long after she had gone to bed he would slip under the covers—a creak, a sigh, and the oblivion of sleep.

Linda ripped the sheets from the bed but the blood had soaked through to the mattress cover. Too late. She pulled off her nightgown, crammed the soiled cloth between her legs and shuffled to the bathroom.

Any type of vaginal bleeding in the second trimester of pregnancy should be reported to your physician, it said in her pregnancy bible. Not good. She decided to take comfort in what followed. *Some women have spotting on and off through their pregnancy and go on to have perfectly healthy babies.*

Spotting. Linda flushed the liver-coloured clots that had drifted to the bottom of the toilet bowl. Clouds of blood spiralled like DNA unfurling. Her chest tight and heavy, she turned her back as the water surged and plummeted with a

rumble of pipes that echoed through the house. This was a bit more than spotting.

The flow of blood was ebbing. At least she had a stash of sanitary napkins in the back of the linen closet, behind the vacuum bags and furniture polish, out of Joe's sight. He didn't like to be confronted with the gross reality of womanhood. Some men were squeamish like that. The linens would have to be soaked and bleached back to a sterile blank.

She pulled a fresh butter-yellow bottom sheet tight under the corners of the mattress with fingers numb to the task. There was no need to worry about Joe's complaints of unneeded luxury. He would chalk the new bedding up to the whim of a woman in her condition. Besides, things were looking up for them, they could afford to treat themselves. He said so every day when the newscast turned to the dismal weight of the falling economy. Things were looking up. *A papery scratching, like dead leaves rolling along an empty street. Something hid under that sound, fluttered in the periphery.* Linda tried to concentrate on the words Joe spoke at the TV, but they landed on the couch, in the space between them, and died before she could take any comfort.

Exhaustion seeped over her like a poisoned gas. Breakfast, nap, lunch, nap, prepare dinner. That was the day she faced, and it ravaged her to think about it. Her legs were lead, her mind swirled with blood-red blooming against stark white.

She should eat something. Iron-deficiency anemia was at the top of her list of suspects for her fatigue—a long with weight-loss. All her resources were being stripped. Fifteen weeks of decline. Linda cinched the drawstring of her sweatpants and headed to the fridge. A metallic taste filled her mouth. Meat. Seared blue-rare. Saliva washed across her tongue as she unwrapped a piece of strip loin. It splashed in the hot pan and sizzled like a sudden rain shower. She licked the blood from her fingers.

Out the window, houses squatted along the street in an unblinking row. On moving day, Linda and Joe had carried their belongings from a rented truck. Amputated pieces of furniture, boxes bulging with those few things they had that deserved a place in their new life. There wasn't much. The neighbours' hungry eyes burned into her from dappled porches, sun-drenched kitchens, molten driveways where husbands washed and waxed their SUVs.

Joe said they could afford the mortgage if they both worked, if they put off kids. It was the cheapest house on the block. One bathroom and an unfinished basement that seeped in the corner, but it had potential. And so did they.

When Richard and Stan had yoo-hooed and taken over the heavy lifting with a clap on Joe's back, she'd felt grateful. She stirred lemonade, catching fresh slices of lime in the spin. An ember of hope—that she would belong, that they would succeed—ignited in her.

Now she peered out at the bustle of families, watched over by the great reflecting windows of the suburbs. Sharp-voiced mothers scolded and teased their children. Couldn't they see the long shadows spilling over the Kentucky bluegrass, black pits waiting for someone to fall? A cry of warning gnawed at her throat. The tick of the kitchen clock marked the day's progress, sucking her forward on a relentless tide. Tick, tick, tick . . .

At the counter, Linda cut into the steak. There was a twinge, a tugging sensation in her abdomen. When she inhaled, the rich aroma of the meat set her swaying on her feet. She placed the dripping morsel on her tongue and began to chew. Without warning her stomach revolted, sending out another flood of saliva—the kind that presaged puking. And puke she did, right into the new porcelain sink. There wasn't much in her and when she was done her gut was left tight and raw.

The garbage-disposal unit thundered as it macerated the rest of the steak, sucking away all evidence of her failing.

Joe would notice if she didn't eat her meat. It was his job to keep track. Every day he asked how she was, looking at her as she delivered her report. Looking at her, but not seeing her, his brow twisted in appropriate concern, his eyes focused on her ear, her shoulder, her hair, never her.

It's not uncommon for men to feel as attracted as usual to their partner in the first trimester, but then to feel less interested in sex in the second or third trimester. This doesn't necessarily mean that your partner doesn't find you attractive any more. Her pregnancy bible had a lot to say on this subject. It was normal for men to worry about hurting the baby, feel self-conscious about having sex in front of the baby, resent the baby for stealing attention.

The book also told her that it was normal for the expectant mother to worry that she wasn't attractive anymore. This wasn't an irrational worry for Linda. It was true. Dark circles sagged under her eyes—the only colour on her paste-like skin. Bones were beginning to protrude where firm flesh had once been; hips, shoulders, cheeks, chest, back were all knobs and angles. Not a good look for her. Joe always said he liked her curves. When she wore the right dress out on the town he wasn't the only one looking. But they didn't go out these days, and those dresses hung in her closet like moulted skins. At least her hair was growing thick and fast like the pregnancy bible said it would. It wouldn't last for long when she started breastfeeding . . . if she started breastfeeding.

Phantom fingers of smoke teased at her nostrils; like an aftertaste they lingered with the residual throb of a drum that left her body shaken.

Another twinge in her abdomen made Linda flinch. A drop, low in her pelvis, an aching pressure, sent her rushing to the bathroom. Liquid came, and something slid out to splash in the bowl. More clots. She didn't want to look, but she did. There was the blood. More this time. And there was

a blob, like fatty tissue, the colour of aged candle wax and threaded with fine red lines.

It was really happening.

The room shifted around her. Her pulse crashed in her ears and when she touched her cheek, her fingers came away wet. She was crying but didn't feel the tears. Her face had turned to stone. A tingling hum itched through the rest of her body like an electric current.

Call Janice. That was what she was supposed to do. But if she called Janice they would all come—Margaret, Tanya, Ellen, Sue—bringing their concern, their casseroles. In hushed voices they would try to help, try to stop it with incantations and advice. But it was happening. Again.

All she could do was lie down. The book said bed rest could stop it from progressing. She wobbled down the hall toward the bedroom, each step accompanied by the plastic-bag crunch of four sanitary napkins she'd plastered to her underwear.

Outside the only closed door in the house, she paused. It was silent on the other side. Richard and Stan had joked and sworn as they assembled the nursery, talking the way they figured tradesmen talked. Amidst hoots of "get 'er done" and "now who's the boss," Joe had rolled paint on the walls, hung mobiles and curtains so they dangled in disarray.

The whole house expanded, holding its breath. She needed to lie down and sleep.

Linda spread her towel across the duvet. No sense messing the bed. She'd just have to make it up again. The towel was dark navy with a white palm tree embroidered on the corner. On their honeymoon in Mexico—after a brunch of pancakes and piña coladas on a terrace overlooking a palm-lined bay—they'd hit the market. Joe and Linda, her arm laced through his. They'd blown all their money on the plane tickets and hotel, so she turned from the bright ethnic dresses, the jewelry and ponchos. Amidst the clamour of neon trinkets the towel had looked classy. It was more than a

towel. It was a bath sheet. Thick and soft and ridiculously large. It was what she wanted for their life. Simplicity, comfort, luxury.

Folding the towel, she lay down on top of it, on her goose-down duvet over her butter-coloured Egyptian cotton sheets. The pain was spreading now, down her thighs and up into her spine. Could she take something? Her book would tell her, but moving was an insurmountable task.

Eyes closed, she tried to let go, release herself to sleep's empty promise. Images rose up in the void behind her eyes. Shrivelled and twisted, eyes sunk into its collapsing skull, dead and rotting inside her. Fists in fragile balls, flailing and kicking as her womb closed in, bit by bit. Motionless but for the mouth, opening, closing, like a minnow left on the beach, mute in its suffering. She couldn't do a thing. No one could.

Linda reached for the night stand and the ring. Her hands had swollen to the point where the ring cut off circulation. There was a chain in her jewelry box—but she kept forgetting to put it on. Linda traced the ring's confines, its wide band, its rough, uncut stone. It used to comfort her. The weight of it recalling the significance of the commitment she'd made.

The commitment they'd all made.

She'd been chosen.

It wasn't a surprise. She was the youngest, the fittest, the prettiest. Robert didn't choose her, however. *He* chose her. But when Robert looked at her, Linda knew he was pleased.

None of them were sure what would happen. There were a lot of fancy words and it was hard to know what was literal, what was mere poetry. It was a means to an end, and the end was good for them all. They were already benefiting, but there was a big boon on the horizon if everything went as *He* intended.

So she was chosen.

She couldn't tell them about before. About the blood and the tears and the discarded waste. She hadn't told Joe. He didn't like to know about things like that—messy things, emotional things. So how could she tell them?

And so she was chosen.

The vessel.

The women prepared her, made her smooth and clean and fragrant. She took pleasure in their ministrations. It was essential that they were all clean, but extra care was taken with Linda.

The ceremony began much the same as it always did. It began with prayer. Richard spoke. *The conduit*. Chosen by *Him*. That night Richard's voice came from deep in his belly, his lungs worked like bellows as he began the invocation.

"We gather in unified purpose. We entreat thee to grant us the power to execute that which we desire to do . . . "

Linda stood in silence, deaf to the ritual. They didn't need this part anymore. *He* came so easily to them now, in this darkened room. But the ritual gave them an anchor. A reminder it was not a small thing, this endeavour.

Joe had nodded when she was chosen. Consent. Linda had felt flattered, felt *His* eyes on her, felt the coiling anticipation of his touch. Consent.

Amid the drums and the chants, robe removed, she burned against the shock of cool air. As she drank the blood, their blood, as they painted the sigils upon her, of winding serpent and sharpened spear, she pulsed like a furnace, like a heart exposed to the lick of candle flame and smoke, gleaming wetly in the half-light.

And Richard came to her, baptized, dripping red. *"I call thee, Eligos, to join with me in our blessed purpose. I humbly entreat thee to manifest in me, to use me as your servant, as your conduit . . . "*

Richard spoke the prescribed words, his eyes turned to glass, his body swaying to the drum's demand. And Eligos came. A sudden seizure took Richard, his body rippled and

strained, tendon and muscle surfacing like cables of a machine. There was Richard, and beside, inside, in front and behind him was Eligos.

Richard's teeth clenched in a rictus grin and he spoke with a hiss, breath dank with rot. Linda heard the words, but they were too loud, too soft to understand. They scattered and scratched like static. Eligos spoke through Richard. Eligos reached for her with Richard's stiff arms. His grip was flame and steel, seething with the wet wriggle of maggots, his fingers finding purchase through her skin, against her bone.

Eligos took her. His skin plaster, stretched and peeling from his skull, a halo of darkness writhing around his head, his eyes black, void. Wings of night closed around them—Eligos and his vessel—feathers that whispered promises of endless nothing. And pain.

Linda screamed. Joe. Just once. Then Linda left. She left her body, left the room with its black candle flame pulsing to the drums. The room where they summoned and Eligos came on wings that reeked of oil and earth. She left. Drifted away like ash in an updraft. And she never returned. Not all the way.

Linda came gasping awake.

A wave of pain contracted. Time. She went to the toilet, stumbling over sleep-dead feet. Tears fell warm on her lap and slid down over the curve of her thigh. She sat and she waited as her abdomen cramped and quaked.

They had been wrong. *He* had been wrong. All the predictions and promises falling from her in fragments. The ring was still in her hand; she dropped it to the floor where it clanked on the cold tile. Through a wash of tears and the haze of pain the ring seemed to shrink, sliding away from her while the walls crushed in. A buzzing blanket fogged her ears, but still she could hear the thundering tread of her

heartbeat as it slowed. The tremors abated, the pain less insistent with each warm gush. And then it was over.

Linda stood. She knew she had to look. Had to see what they had done.

In the stew of blood, of clots and portions of afterbirth, the babe lay curled, knees to chin. The bundle was smaller than her fist, and perfect. Fingers, toes, smooth curve of back and head.

Linda knelt, wrapping her arms tight around herself, forcing herself together. Over. The pain, the blood . . . over. She was breathing loudly now, gulping air in huge gasps that emptied the room with each heaving lungful.

She flushed. She had pressed the lever before she even registered the shock of cold metal under her hand. Every last bit drained away. Was gone.

As Linda lay on her bed, windows curtained against the sun, the stain on the back of her eyelids set. The babe, adrift in the bowl. Hands flutter, feet stir. Perhaps with the tidal sway of the water. Perhaps.

The Oily Man

Alex Jeffers

I must have slept. I may have, must have dreamt, of Rosecq for it was always Rosecq, but my alarm when I lurched awake was not inspired by nightmare. I would have bolted upright and yelled except the thing that woke me was a weight, a solid, fleshy weight athwart me, seated between chest and belly with its legs trapping my arms and cramping my ribs so I could not breathe deeply. Nevertheless, I began to make a noise—muffled at once by a sweaty palm pressed over my open mouth.

Not sweat. Sweet oil smeared my lips. When I tried to throw my head aside, the oily hand slipped, but then the visitant clamped fingers and thumb hard on my jaw.

Terror caused me to buck and kick. My heels struck the thin pallet with bruising force, causing the wood beneath it to flex and boom. As the bed wobbled, a displaced edge of the pest-netting brushed my face like cobwebs. The darkness in my chamber was unnaturally absolute, I could see nothing but black, yet somehow I knew when the visitant leaned close over me. Perhaps the dregs of longing for Rosecq had persuaded me he was a man but now the insistent weight of his desire against my chest left no doubt. Unseen lips approaching my own, he breathed.

Fragrant as night-blooming tuberose, his breath, dense and intoxicating, nearly sickening. I had no choice but to inhale. Immediately I became unable to struggle, my limbs unresponsive to command. The night visitor breathed again into my nostrils, and then he loosed hold on my jaw and I

felt him sit upright again. For a moment he brushed the fingers of both hands through the hair on my chest. He had yet to make a sound but I commenced a thin, involuntary whimper like distant breathy laughter.

One of the visitor's hands moved, finding its way behind the unseen body. Creeping across my hip, it discovered and smoothly grasped the part of any man that stands to attention when he wakes.

To my deadened ears, the tenor of my whimper did not change as oily fingers caressed me. I felt I should be outraged, appalled, indignant, but behind my eyes I was roaring, howling, to feel at last sensations Rosecq had denied me. The solitary ministrations of my own hand seemed in my mind a grotesque, distorted mirror. And then the visitor bent forward again. He exhaled once more in my face his paradisaal breath. I did not understand how he could lean so far while maintaining his clever grip, but then his lips touched mine and I forgot. Forgot all my yearning for aloof, unattainable Rosecq, thousands of miles away and three years buried in the chilly soil outside the walls of Trebt. Forgot that this person had not been invited into my chamber, my bed. That I did not know who he was.

That I was helpless under his weight and the enchantment of his breath.

I do not know how to say what he did, what actions he performed on me in my bodily swoon. It went on a very long time, it seemed. Taking my own self in hand had always been something I viewed as weakness, to be got over with quickly, but he would have none of that. His hands were involved, and his mouth, his lips and tongue, the slickly greasy surfaces of his skin as he moved atop me. Hard as bone yet fleshy, his own need proclaimed its presence, but his lips and fingers were more concerned with my wants. I was concerned with wanting. Wanting to do to him in return what he was doing for me. Acts I had not dared imagine or could not imagine. Acts my lassitude would not permit.

It went on a very long time. My tropic sweat combined with the oil that sheened him and the heavy moisture of the air and his perfumed breath to create a drug that slowed time and made my desires languorous, if not as languorous as my limbs. I feel he took my aching flesh into his mouth, coaxing—I no longer possessed an impetus toward curiosity, only satiation—I feel he later welcomed me into a more private place. It went on a very long time until it ended in an uproar of sensations like the intricate, startling flashes and bangs of the tiny black-powder bombs the people of Folau lit to scare off malign spirits.

I woke when my dragoman banged on the wooden door frame. Oppressive heat told me where I was—that is, that I was not abed in my native clime—but for some moments I could not determine who I was. Then Mefao banged again and called my name through the louvered door.

Her full name was Asthemefashasso but she knew foreigners with two- or three-syllable personal names, three- or four-syllable family names, fumbled intolerably with the complex single-word phrase-names traditional in Folau. Her command of my language seemed to me supernatural and I felt she was a censorious, judgmental person, although I did not understand her standards.

“What is it?” I asked, struggling to rouse. The pest-netting draped around my bed, I discovered, had torn loose at several points. Fraying gauze clung to sweaty skin, tangled about one flailing arm that threatened to bring the whole canopy down. I did not wish Mefao to discover me in this state.

“The morning deepens, sir,” she said through the door. “You are to lunch with your sister at noon. You wished to bathe beforehand.”

Finally wrestling free, I planted my feet on the floor. I recollected that Mefao could not easily burst in on me, my door being locked. Latches and locks were a novelty in this

country, imported by and insisted upon by the merchant-adventurers' consortium when they had the subcontinental canton built. The damnable heat slowed and confused my thinking. Sweat trickled distractingly down my sides. I was far from the only northerner, I imagined, who had learned early not to wear as much as a shirt into bed, though it still felt peculiar to me, unseemly. Adepts, acolytes, and saints of the Kandadal cult stalked unclothed about the streets of Folau. I had seen them already, as short a time as it was since my arrival. A nude man would be no particular novelty for Mefao—not even a tall, pallid, hirsute northerner: I had been told about several subcontinental converts among the Kandadal's devotees. But I was not a saint. Making a noise so she would not believe me ignoring her, I stood and reached for the crumpled sarong thrown across the back of the chair.

Wrapping and tucking, I had my lower parts covered before I reached the door. The key slipped in greasy fingers.

The door had been locked all night. Oil glistened on my body hair and skin. Fragrances persisted in the still, enclosed air: tuberose and heavy sweat and the salted-milk odor of a man's emissions—my emissions—under the swirling, luxurious smoke of incense meant to discourage flying insects.

I pulled the door wide and immaculate Mefao strode through, the clap of her wood-soled pattens loud against the floor. Her arms were laden with freshly laundered, starched, pressed fabrics: the garments of an haut-bourgeois of Trebt. These she piled atop the bureau. When she turned, I knew she saw the ruin of pest-netting over the bed but she said nothing.

"I—" I began but could not recall the thought.

Her eyes rested lightly on me, as if I were the same man she had bade goodnight after guiding me back to the canton from a tedious banquet. With a practiced tilt of her head, she said, "You forget the way to the baths, sir?" as though I

had not been resident in the canton nearly a full month, bathing every other day.

"No, of course not. I—" I extended open palms as if they held something whose meaning I could not decipher. "My door was locked. All night."

Mefao's eyes narrowed, widened as her nostrils flared. She glanced at the bed again, then the tall, wide windows. Like the door, they were louvered, but additionally screened by lengths of stretched white muslin—taut, undisturbed. She sniffed again. "Ekeksengek," she said.

The word or phrase was not part of my very meager vocabulary.

"You had best bathe, sir," she said very quickly. "Ask the attendant for clove-oil soap." Turning back to the bureau, she pulled open a drawer to draw out a folded sarong. "Have him burn your present garment. While you are gone, I will—"

"What was it, Mefao? Who was he?"

Holding out the neat package, its green and blue and crimson plaid crisp, she looked away, looked down. She was a small woman, all her people were small, the drape of her own skirt and loose brocade jacket as precise as her movements. "Ekeksengek," she said again. "The Oily Man. I did not think *you* . . ." It almost seemed to me she was suppressing a kind of mean amusement as she waited for me to accept the sarong. "He is not generally harmful or cruel, but . . . troubling?"

I was troubled. I took the clean garment from Mefao's hands, wondering whether it continued clean once it touched the oils on my skin. I asked, "How did he pass the locked door? Is he a demon?"

"A demon?" Stepping away from me, she appeared to ponder. "Nothing so malign or powerful, I think. Perhaps in your terms, a kind of goblin. It would be wise, sir, to cleanse yourself of his traces."

Troubled, I felt there were words she was not saying which I ought to understand, but I had been here only a short while

and I did not trust Mefao to explain if I persisted. Her loyalty was paid for by my elder sister.

So I left without further argument. It was a short walk through the canton's gardens from my bungalow to the sunken baths. Sunlight and heat punished me for walking too quickly, but the attendant offered a cup of lemon water to refresh me while he sought out the clove-oil soap Mefao advised. Sipping my lemon water, I waited on the stone bench inside the wellhead pavilion.

Laughter rose from below, followed by two persons coming up the stairs. I failed to recognize the man, tall and burly and fair, until he boomed a greeting and recommendation I enjoy the brief respite of the baths' cool depths. A friendly rival of my sister's, he was the local commander of the Kevvel Company, which affected military discipline and attire. I had never previously seen the man out of formal kit, under which he must wear severe corsetry still more uncomfortable in this climate than at home in temperate Kevvel. Abashed by the bulk and presence adorned by his kirtled sarong, I made a conventional reply as he and his companion paused for the conventional moment. Then the companion murmured something in her own language that caused the commander to laugh. "She says you stink as pungently as I after a day of labor," he said, still chuckling, "so bathe well, my friend, bathe well."

The discourtesy startled me. I glared at the small woman draped and cumbered in layers of brightly patterned and embroidered fabrics until she lowered her eyes and turned her head and preceded her employer out of the pavilion.

The attendant had returned with a lump of pungent soap. At my shoulder, he muttered, "Ladyboy." I could not distinguish whether his intonation suggested respect or disdain. Startled again, I glanced after her but she was gone. Taking soap and towel, I allowed the man to refill my cup, and then began my descent.

The air grew agreeably cooler with every gallery around the perimeter of the great well, cooler and more damp. Where shards of sunlight fell from above, moss bloomed emerald green on the brick to one side, the marble balustrades to the other. The impacts of my pattens' soles on the stairs echoed. I continued past the level of the great tank, where one person floated spread eagle in the green water under the stony eyes of the baths' patrons, fifty-year-dead merchant-adventurers of Trebt, Kevvel, Asana, and other subcontinental nations. Carved in the Avengi heroic style, the figures were recognizable as foreigners only on account of their costumes.

The light became less certain, the echoes more complex, the paving beneath my pattens sloshing with spilled water. I made sure to pass four empty alcoves before entering the fifth. Here I laid folded sarong and towel on the shelf by the entrance, set aside my cup, discarded pattens and soiled garment, before stepping under the runnel of cool water pouring endlessly from its outlet. For long moments I simply shivered as it rinsed the fever from my skin. Then I took up the soap with its nose-burning fragrance, applied it to banishing the oils and fragrances bestowed on me by the Oily Man.

I was sent to the far side of the world because my elder siblings had finally acknowledged they could make no good use of me in Trebt. I faltered at every task they set me, my small household was ineptly managed, I had damaged relations between my family and Rosecq's, I could not even be married off to any advantage. At nearly the same moment, trade winds blew the annual flotilla home from the Great Eastern Company's scattered outposts. Our sister Therzin's dispatch mentioned she was with child and, by the by, the queen on the Jade Stool in Defre-ua-Bodo had grown cool.

An old Great Eastern hand, retired home as a consequence of tropic fever, explained Therzin's offhand remark. The Avengi queen was known to like surrounding herself with pretty things, pretty people. She had never cared to bear a child of her own because pregnancy was unaesthetic and babies unruly. She was forever pensioning off wives and husbands, ministers and servants, for the offense of ageing. The exotic foreign merchants in the subcontinental canton of her port at Folau fascinated the queen but she seldom cared to see them. Therzin's rare favor at court had given the Great Eastern Company a minor advantage over the companies of other nations.

Whether Therzin had grown out of her beauty—we had not seen her in ten years—or if it was her fecundity that gave offense, the fact remained: our advantage was gone. My sisters and brothers looked at one another and then at me. I was young—I was, they agreed, decorative—I was equipped with pretty manners. Perhaps I need not continue a liability.

And so, valuable cargo, I was loaded aboard the company's roundship *Fortune's Lad* along with a chest of gifts for Aveng's queen, a cedar trunk of handsome clothing for myself, and an elderly, hence expendable, servant. Avengi herself, she was meant both to care for me on the voyage and to stuff what she might of her language into my stupid head. Sadly, I learned little before she perished of a grippe brought aboard at the Asaen entrepôt in the Summer Archipelago. We had not yet passed the northern tropic. The same grippe laid me low for several weeks, not that I wasn't a poor sailor beforehand. Often and often and often again on that seven-month voyage, in sultry calm and bitter storm, I wished to die.

As ever, I failed to carry through. I had a good notion of the value of the bets against my surviving as far as Folau.

Between his death and my departure, I had attempted not to remember Rosecq. Naturally, good amounts of aqua vitae,

genever, and the newly introduced sugar-rum were required to bolster that determination. Aboard *Fortune's Lad* such remedies were rationed, the rations too small to serve. Indeed, the little I was permitted served best to further disturb an already uneasy belly. I had brought a cask of tobacco, but that drug's effect was more vivifying than soothing. I would not learn about hemp or opium until I reached Folau. During dark nights when exile and the rocking of the ship disturbed me, I contemplated the man I loved and the disaster I had made of loving him.

The boy I loved: we were of an age.

The young man I killed.

An idiot, I had brought two tokens to remind me of folly. Shutting myself into the stifling closet of my cabin at night, the fluttering lamp on its chains swaying overhead, I would draw out my keys to open the cedar chest, first, then the small casket of ironwood. I stumbled to the narrow bunk. When I was a drunkard on dry land, opening the casket would unman me, reduce me to tears. At sea, sober, exiled, ill, my reaction was . . . different.

Always, I opened the diptych first. It was fashioned for travel in the mode of those portable altarpieces that allow you to carry your chapel about in miniature. Latched, it was bound in leather-covered boards like a book of devotions or poems, albeit lacking tooled symbols or words to indicate its contents. Unlatched . . . unlatched and laid open on my thigh, a pair of painted youths gazed up at me from either leaf. I had liked to imagine their lips met in comradely affection when the thing was closed, but that was when Rosecq and hope still breathed. In any case, the portraits were the work of different artists, in different modes and at different scales, never intended to be bound together any more than Rosecq and I.

On the left, the boy was seen at half length, richly costumed and adorned with gold and gems, his expression at once stern and inviting, for it was meant to demonstrate I

was of good and prosperous lineage, healthy and well made: a satisfactory son-in-law. The painter had made four of them. So practiced was he, they could scarcely be told apart. I knew for a fact one of the other copies was enclosed with the dispatch directed to Therzin, which she might send on to the court in Defre-ua-Bodo to encourage an invitation for me to attend the queen.

On the right, a silverpoint and chalk sketch made by the drawing master we shared on an afternoon Rosecq came to the studio directly from weapons practice. Striding through the door, he was unkempt, sweaty, his outer garments unfastened and the collar and front of his shirt unlaced. He was impatient, unwilling to change over so quickly from martial to civil arts—he had never hidden his belief that limning was a frivolous, ungentlemanly skill. Impatient with Rosecq's humor, our master, who had apprenticed in the ateliers of Katothtet and studied the works of the ancients, joked that an athlete's artistic worth lay in his person rather than any skill with chalk or brush.

At once, arrogant Rosecq rose from his seat. He threw his velvet coat over the plaster bust of a Katothine emperor we were meant to be drawing and struck a martial pose. The master merely raised his eyebrows—not his chalk. So goaded, Rosecq began to strip off his remaining clothing, swiftly, as if not to permit himself time to consider the impropriety. In scarcely a moment, it almost seemed, he stood before us nude as a stalwart warrior of antiquity.

Not chiselled marble or cast bronze or molded plaster—not chalk on paper or paint on panel or canvas. Our master had set at once to work with stylus and chalk while I gaped dumbfounded. By the incongruity, yes, of the naked haut-bourgeois's heir inviting our examination and re-creation, by Rosecq's nearly casual immodesty—by his unexpected beauty. His visage was not handsome. Whereas age-mates teased me for what they called the feminine symmetry and delicacy of my features, Rosecq was both scorned and

admired for a face that bypassed masculinity into bestiality, features ill sorted and ill proportioned. Without clothes, though, his profile turned away, he was a young god.

I scrambled up my tools at last and committed several botches. The master, meanwhile, worked swiftly, deftly, tossing each drawing aside as it was done, with an impatient word to Rosecq to alter his stance. One sketch fluttered to the floor near my feet. I scuffed it aside, out of sight. When Rosecq abruptly recollected himself, his dignity, he cursed like a fishmonger and gathered his clothing, disappearing behind a screen. I plucked up the master's drawing and hid it away.

Rosecq did not return to the master's studio. Whatever protest he made to his parents, the rumor that whispered around town was obscene. I suppose my brothers heard it and assumed I was a likelier object of the master's supposed infatuation, for my lessons were halted without explanation. Not many weeks later, I heard the master had left the city. Rosecq strutted a bit but had the wit not to speak of why.

Did I already love him? I believe I did. In certain ways he was clever, in certain ways kind. With animals and small children he was always gentle. Sometimes he was kind to me, seldom cruel, until I gave him no other choice.

Desire, though—I date my desire for him to that afternoon when I devoured the grace and potential of his unclothed body with my eyes.

Setting the diptych aside, I opened the contract. I had paid a good sum for it: to purchase the advocate's discretion as well as her services. In formal blue-black, black, and red inks, her precise chancellery hand spelled out the terms of *affrèment* on fine laid paper, but the traditional vow was inscribed in gold: *one bread, one salt; one meat, one wine; one purse, one life until death*. Below, my signature was a morass of scratches and blots. I can write legibly enough with my left hand but a sinistral endorsement has never been valid. Rosecq, of course, had signed neither copy—had

torn the one to confetti and burned it, then issued the fatal challenge.

One bread, one salt; one meat, one wine; one purse, one life until death.

I folded the paper along old creases that threatened to tear. To the challenged goes the choice of weapons: pistols, for I did not wish to be toyed with as a cat plays with a mouse. I wished to die quickly. My second—an acquaintance to whom I never again spoke—and I met Rosecq and his second well outside the city and the law. Mist from the canals and sodden fields smothered the world as the sun rose, but there was light enough. The seconds examined the pistols, pronounced them sound, loaded and exchanged them, then paced off the field of honor. I could not bring myself to look at Rosecq as I took my place. Alternating formal clauses, the seconds recited the duel's terms. As was tradition, neither knew the quarrel. As was tradition, Rosecq was offered a final opportunity to demand a different satisfaction, which for an instant he appeared to consider, muttering my name. But then, in turn, the opportunity to abase myself and apologize for the unacknowledged insult was offered me. I said nothing. I could not apologize for loving him. The lanterns were raised. I looked down the length of my arm and pistol barrel into Rosecq's eyes. The white kerchief dropped. I fired.

Rosecq's shot went wide. I will forever be tormented, not knowing whether he intended to miss. Whether I intended to strike true. His second would not permit me to attend the crumpled form forty paces distant, so I will never know either whether he had moments or hours to understand I had killed him, or no time at all.

I felt I had scrubbed my skin raw and would never get the stench of cloves out of my nostrils. Eyes closed, I backed up under the flowing spout to rinse the soap away again. The small light behind my eyelids changed. Water rushing past

my ears had covered the sounds of approaching feet, wooden pattens clattering on brick. When I burst out of the stream, gasping for heavy air, I was not alone in the alcove.

"Clove?" the Kevveller commander's companion asked in my language. "You wish the ekeksengek to return?" Leaning casually in the doorway, she regarded me with cool eyes.

The instant I saw her my hands had fallen to cover my sex, as if it might be a novelty to a courtesan. The lump of soap I had dropped skittered across flooded tiles toward her and she neatly kicked it aside.

"Clove is a hot oil, tengs. If you hope to discourage the hot-blooded ekeksengek, what's required is tungs, cool." Her hand moved abruptly and something hurtled at me.

Unthinking, I caught it: a small brick of soap that smelled very different when I lifted it to my nose, fresh and vegetal.

"Basil," she said. "Few of the uncanny beings like the scent."

I liked it better than the clove, but I shook my head. "My dragoman said—"

"Do you trust your dragoman?"

I did not.

"You have no reason to trust me, either, of course. And no doubt you found the ekeksengek's attentions . . . pleasurable."

"Who are you?"

"One upon whom the Oily Man was set, long ago. Thus I recognized his fragrance on you." She moved, turned half away. "He was meant to show me I was a proper man."

I had forgotten what the attendant, up above on the surface of the world, had called her. In uncertain, underground light, I discerned nothing to persuade me she wasn't a proper woman. But it was the first part of her statement that nagged me. "Set upon you?" I asked.

Turning her gaze full upon me, she said, "The Oily Man possesses little will of his own." Her eyes seemed to be thickly lined with kohl. "He must be directed—summoned

from the strange place where he lives, given instruction, a target. The most he may do of his own volition is refuse, if he finds the prey . . . unsuitable.” She lowered, then raised heavy lids, then looked away again. “Use the tungs soap or not, as you choose. I must go.”

“Wait,” I said. “Unsuitable?”

“Not a virgin,” she said precisely, and left.

Cool water still flowed over my shoulders but now it felt chill. I believed I understood Mefao’s amusement: for a man of twenty years to be virginal was ludicrous, shameful. Equally chilling, if I was to believe the ladyboy, my dragoman’s recommendation of a perfume that would encourage the Oily Man’s attentions. Then I shivered in earnest as a third understanding took shape in my mind: somebody, some enemy, had meant the Oily Man to seduce me.

Or a friend? Somebody who believed (as surely I did, somehow) I was incomplete, crippled, so long as I had never acted on my desires?

In Folau I had neither enemies or friends. Even my sister was little more than an acquaintance.

Unprecedentedly crafty, I chose not to use the ladyboy’s basil-oil soap. Mefao expected me to return from my bath reeking of clove. I did not know her motives, nor the ladyboy’s—which was lying, which wished the Oily Man back in my bed. I was uncertain enough whether I myself desired another meeting with him.

Meaning to hide it for future use, I placed the tungs soap at the shadowed back of the shelf by the door, then attempted to rinse its odor off my hands. My nose drugged by the other soap’s smell, I was unsure if I succeeded. Then I dried and dressed myself and left the cool refuge of my alcove, climbing upward into the heat of the day.

Somehow after only a month out of the habit, I found the day dress of a Trebter haut-bourgeois insupportable: too

many pieces, too many buttons and laces, too much and too heavy fabric that swaddled and bound me up too tightly as if it meant me not to breathe. It all smelled stiflingly of cedar. My feet and lower legs in stockings resembled overcooked sausages aching to burst their skins. Buckled shoes were lighter on my feet than wood-soled pattens but tight, and the fashionable heels threw off my stride. Yet it would not be seemly to attend my elder sister, veritably a stranger, in less formal attire. I could not but expect to be on display for a representative of the queen's court.

Resigned, I shouldered on the skirted coat that matched the long waistcoat. Brocade Haisn silk was lightweight but stiffened into shape with starched linen and lined with vegetable-wool, bulky and balky. I imagined I must be red faced and goggle eyed and did not wish to see it so forbore from glancing in the glass, but clapped on my tall hat and stepped out onto the veranda.

Mefao set aside her contemplation and stood. "You are ready, sir?" I felt I did not imagine the flare of her nostrils that acknowledged my clove and cedar stink, the compression of her lips she prevented becoming a smile. "Very good."

Following her toward the canton's gate, I envied her easy, unconstricting costume. No doubt, born to this heat, she did not feel it as I did, either. Having emerged from the subcontinental enclave, we boarded the waiting sampan and were borne away along the canal. Downstream lay the anchorage—I could see the tall masts of subcontinental roundships and junques of Haisn, the lateen rig of a small coaster from nearby Dothe or U pulling out into the channel—and beyond, the quarantine isle of Ekada-fo and the open sea, but we travelled upstream.

On the bank opposite the foreigners' canton rose the gold-spined stupas and pagodas of the Bodo monastery built on foreign profits by the previous queen. When I admired its splendor aloud, Mefao smirked. The monks and nuns

dedicated to Father Bodo, she told me, kept up an unceasing prayer meant to keep us contained and tractable. She glanced aside. Not merely the foreign merchants, she went on: Folau's own burghers and merchants were less biddable than the queen's government wished. Scarcely a century before, Folau had been its own nation, spoken a different language.

"Truly?" I asked, for my own city, Trebt, professed fealty to the distant Great King while busily going its own way, taking little account of his vicereine, a woman who spoke our language less well than Mefao.

She nodded toward the shallows below the monastery, where countless bamboo staves displayed topknots of vivid ribbons. The queen's Father Bodo dwelled in the waters of his namesake river, she said, two weeks' sea voyage north and east or three by road: he was not Folau's god. "Of course we honor him," she said. "It would be foolish, impolitic, not to. The Kandadal himself had no quarrel with any god." Then she looked away.

I meant to say I had understood the Kandadal, whose ribbons they were, eleven colors symbolizing his eleven precepts, to be more foreign still, but did not. Born, raised, educated, enlightened in the remote mountain realm of Sfothem, north and west of Folau a good many more than three weeks, the mad philosopher was not as foreign as I.

The oarsman was strong. Soon enough, we slid past the parklands surrounding the monastery. Here against the banks stood the city dwellings of prosperous merchant families, built of lacquered and painted wood atop warehouses and counting houses of glazed brick. Until I saw the tall gold-haired woman in a gown of outdated Trebter cut standing on the water stairs between staves fluttering the Kandadal's ribbons, I did not know which was our destination.

My elder sister handed her infant daughter to the waiting nurse and came down the stairs. She acknowledged Mefao

with a nod. To me, she said, “Brother. Welcome,” and turned to lead me up. She retrieved the baby and introduced me. The woman I had taken for a nurse, a servant, was another of the household’s mothers, thus of the same or higher rank as Therzin. It had somehow not occurred to me that, taking a local husband, my sister had married into a local family—her husband was not solely hers, this woman had become, in effect, at once Therzin’s sister and her wife. One of her wives, as the husband, too, was but one of several.

I tried to hide my dizzy revelation with fulsome praise of the baby’s beauty, but knew Mefao saw it and was amused. Doubtless Therzin saw it as well. We went in. I met the household’s fathers—it was not made clear to me which slight, pretty man had sired Therzin’s pretty daughter—the mothers presently at home, charming children. Mefao and Therzin translated flying compliments and banter. I was presented to another foreigner, a woman of the Sjolussene delegation garbed as inappropriately for the climate as my sister and I.

At home in the subcontinent on the far side of the world, Sjolussa was at protracted war with the Great King to whom Trebt and Kevvel owed fealty, but here I felt I was meant to be polite. She was very beautiful—more beautiful than Therzin, more beautiful than I—and when then I was introduced to a peculiarly unpleasing person from Defre-ua-Bodo, the queen’s capital, I understood the Sjolussene and I were rivals. The queen’s representative (a eunuch, I tardily realized) would find one or the other—or neither?—sufficiently decorative and intriguing to merit the queen’s attention.

When we settled to the banquet, scooping strange, pungent foods with our fingers from broad green leaves, my sister confirmed my suspicion, speaking in low tones at my side. Sjolussa was desperate for the queen’s favor and concessions, for that landlocked town had only recently joined the eastern sea trade. Sjolussene merchants (more

accurately, merchants of Fejz and Dinsey, seaports annexed a decade earlier) were restricted to Ekada-fo offshore: to the paltry leavings of those subcontinental nations established in the canton. Her ancient wealth founded on caravans from the east, Sjolussa took the insult hard. That insignificant vassals of her old enemy the Great King took precedence made the insult more dire.

My next mouthful, unexpectedly, contained several whole basil leaves. As I tasted the tungs flavor and inhaled the tungs fragrance, I happened to notice the Sjolussene beauty regarding me, her expression blank as she chewed. The tungs fragrance of clove still clinging to me combined with the basil to make a scent for a moment sickening, so that I lowered my hand and held my breath. Then it was a different odor altogether, luxuriously rich and corrupt, as if the Oily Man had returned. I felt a hot flush on my cheeks and chest. The eunuch seemed to smile. I found myself interested in my cup of harsh arrack.

In addition to the arrack, there was mother-of-arrack—a sweet wine fermented from the sap of palm trees—and a kind of still beer brewed from rice. The eunuch did not carry his liquor as well as I, becoming vague and morose. When he had departed, followed after a short interval by the Sjolussene and her party, one of my sister's husbands served around a thick, bitter tisane which he called *coffee* and which Therzin said would clear my head.

It was apparent she was as disappointed in me as our distant sisters and brothers. I owned a certain cleverness, I was sure, but it had never been a merchant's or courtier's cleverness. My cleverness saw that Therzin's loyalty was divided between her families, Trebter and Avengi, and that this caused her to feel guilt. A reaction that made no sense to me. I would serve the Great Eastern Company as I might, but not out of loyalty to the family that exiled and pitied me. Because I had no life of my own—because it was less

irksome to go along with the family's schemes, however ineptly, than any other course of action I could imagine.

After showing me through the warehouse and listing off its contents—sacks of pungent spices, bales of vegetable-wool, stacks of dye-wood, and casks of already rendered dyes, a great fortune of other goods—my sister sent me and Mefao back to the canton. I was no use to her unless the queen's eunuch recommended me over the Sjolussene woman.

In the sampan punting along the canal, I reflected. I had no understanding of the qualities that would impress the eunuch or his queen, no guesses as to whom he would choose. I felt I had not displayed any particular wit . . . but the Sjolussene had spoken less than I. I believed she was more beautiful than I . . . but my standards were not Avengi. The queen's last foreign pet (my sister) had been a woman . . . perhaps for novelty she would prefer a man for her next.

I had no say in the matter, whatever the case. I realized—this bothered me only a moment—I did not care. I could only accept what was offered. When I had tried to take what I wanted, what I wanted was taken from the world.

Mefao on the low seat opposite was not looking at me. I closed my eyes, leaned back, raised my face to the sky, breathed. Little as they thought of me, my sisters and brothers would not allow me to starve or suffer gravely. If I was not chosen to entertain the queen in Defre, some other small task would be found for me. I was incapable of causing disaster (just once), only annoyance and disappointment.

At the canton gate, I dismissed the dragoman, retreating to the relative dimness and cool of my bungalow. I stripped off my confining, stifling Trebter clothes, for some moments contemplated donning a sarong and retreating again to the baths. It seemed I had become accustomed to the odor of cloves on my skin. The stretched muslin over the bungalow windows wicked up water from troughs on the floor, cooling

the breezes that passed through. Weary, replete after the heavy meal, I locked my door and retreated to my bed. It seemed to me later I had forgotten the ladyboy's advice regarding tengs and tungs, the likelihood—the inevitability—the desirousness, the yearning—of the ekeksengek's return.

I know I slept, but not for long. I was lying on my belly when I smelled again the Oily Man's fragrance and felt his heated weight on my back. "Please," I said. The windows still glowed white.

He did not drug me, except with pleasure.

When I woke again, I was alone in the dark. Unpleasantly still, the humid air reeked with mingled odors: incense, sweat, cloves, spilled seed, the ekeksengek's tuberose. He as well as I had spilled seed—it was painted, films and crusts, on my chest and face—but his smelled of him, intoxicating, not like salt and curdling milk. I tried to speak, to call him back, but uttered only a small, sad croak.

There had been light during this second visitation, light enough. I had seen the Oily Man—he had displayed himself to be admired—but I could not now call to mind his form or features. I remembered only the acts we had performed as if for the first time in all the history of the world. I remembered the homely face and heroic body of my lost love and imagined that if Rosecq had but once permitted me to make love to him as the ekeksengek had made love to me, he should be mine and I still safe in Trebt.

I could not recall the Oily Man's appearance but I knew very well he did not resemble Rosecq, as well as I knew Rosecq could never have loved me.

From a distance outside my windows came a series of reports like rapid gunfire. Flinching, I scrambled off the bed. A filmy wisp of something plastered itself to my sweating face. Even as I flailed, I knew what it was—simply a rag of

torn pest-netting—and then I heard the deep voice of a brass gong booming under the sounds of pistol shots. A native fête or ceremony outside the canton's walls, the noise I interpreted as guns being tiny black-powder bombs strung in chains, hazardous only if one stood right over them as they flared and popped in the street.

Such a fête seemed to occur every third night. Other merchants in the compound darkly believed they were meant to unnerve us, sponsored by noble factions regretting extension of the capitulations to the mainland, to Folau's canton. They in turn presumed to be funded by the quarantined Sjolussene Adventurers' Company, jealous of our privileges. The conspiracies imagined by my fellow foreigners were nothing if not complex.

To the discordant banging of drums and bleating of horns, the erratic rat-rattle of the strings of bombs, I paced about the room, my heart slowing. I lit a lamp. I splashed warm water on my face, scrubbed at the fragrant residue of the Oily Man's emissions. He would not return this night, I felt, however I longed to rediscover that passion. Nor was I likely to sleep again.

As I glanced about, I noticed the cask of tobacco and my pipe, then a flask of arrack I hardly remembered purchasing on one of my idle explorations of the town beyond the canton's wall. It was the work of a moment to fill the pipe and twist a paper spill to light it. The first draught of smoke in my lungs began to calm me and I chose to unlock my door and, with pipe and arrack, step onto the verandah.

No cooler, the air was less still, less stifling. It occurred to me that I was nude but not that nudity was a matter of concern. I saw lamps lighting the screened windows of other bungalows but none was nearby and I had not brought out my own lamp. Beyond the canton's walls the fête went on, banging, bleating, clamoring. Standing at the head of the stair, I stretched, delighting in a peculiar, unfamiliar form of freedom, then puffed and sipped, then moved to sit.

I was not alone on the verandah.

A figure sat in darkness in the chair beyond the one I had chosen. "Tengs," said the ladyboy. "Still tengs. You wished him to return, the ekeksengek?"

I had started, but immediately it almost seemed I had anticipated her presence. "Yes." She had already seen me naked, in daylight. I stepped around my chair and sat.

"And so he did."

"Yes. Will he come again?"

She was silent a moment longer. "Perhaps. He can become . . . attached."

"I would like that, I think."

"Would you?"

I felt I heard a smile in her voice, sarcastic but not unkind. Abruptly shy, I drew on my pipe before beginning: "I have never—"

"You *will* never," she said. "He is not fully a person. You know already everything of him there is to know, there is no more to learn." She rose from her seat. "May I taste your pipe? My patron prefers me not to smoke but I have a fondness for it."

She moved a step nearer and I blindly extended the pipe for her. When she inhaled, the brightening coal gave shape and form to her face: a man's face, a young native man. Her sweat was pungent, masculine. Turning her head, she blew smoke away from me, drew from the pipe again, and I realized she wore no upper garment. Her torso was not at all womanly.

I coughed.

The ladyboy inhaled a last time from the pipe, then handed it down to me. She did not step back, return to her seat. Raising both hands to her head, she pulled free the picks that restrained the heavy coils of her hair. As the oiled weight of it tumbled around her naked shoulders and back, she said, "You know that our language makes no distinction

between *she* and *he*?" Still she had not moved away. "I long for him still, the ekeksengek. He is a potent drug."

My heart rattled like the tiny bombs on the street beyond the walls. "Am I meant to become like you?"

At last she moved. The fabric of her sarong brushed my knee as she turned toward the verandah's railing. "You're meant to become the ekeksengek's whore, not any man's or woman's. You're meant to lose yourself in his delights and be consumed, as the addict is consumed by opium—to become, as he is, merely an appetite. A tool."

"Of the Sjolussenes?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'm my family's tool already."

"If I knew who had set the ekeksengek on you," she told the gardens, "I would tell you."

I believed she was sincere.

"There is a story," she went on, "a legend of the Kandadal before he became Kandadal, when he was merely a flighty young man of no great account. It's said he was visited on succeeding nights by the ekeksengek, the Oily Man, and the Oily Woman, nurursengnur. There were two then, who prowled the world of women and men, and both retained full possession of their wills, selecting their prey for their own reasons, obeying no person's bidding.

"The youth who was not yet Kandadal pleased both so well that they returned on the third night, not together but at the same moment. Jealous, they made to battle over which should have the use of his body, a prospect that dismayed the young man. Even then, disharmony appalled him. He was ready to share himself between them but the single-minded creatures would not have it. They began to wrestle. It was a brutal contest, the two mighty beings straining, oiled hand slipping on oiled flank. The young man found the vision exciting, for he could now and then imagine they indulged in love rather than hatred. His excitement troubled him as much as their rivalry. He closed his eyes.

“He commenced chanting—nonsense, syllables that made no words but which calmed him, drawing his unease and horror and vengence into balance. Meanwhile, the uncanny battle raged on. The ekeksengek was stronger, the nurursengnur more crafty. At last, after a month’s worth of nights had passed, the Oily Man prevailed. He gaped open his mouth and consumed the Oily Woman entire. Uttering a great belch, triumphant ekeksengek turned toward the youth he desired.

“After a month’s starvation, the young man was skeletal, dry, grey—no longer desirable. Horrifying. The Oily Man belched again, in dismay, and the Kandadal discovered and uttered the final syllable which made him Kandadal. He opened his eyes wide.

“*You are one*, he said to the Oily Man, *and bound—one, and free*. Rising carefully to his feet, he offered a deep obeisance.

“The ekeksengek’s mouth opened again, as if in surprise, but it was not surprise for his mouth continued to gape, wider and wider, though he clamped strong hands to his jaw to prevent it. It was not long before his lips split back over the crown of his skull. Like a serpent’s sloughing skin, the Oily Man’s flesh disgorged a different being, a person as bright and beautiful as the crescent moon, glistening with fragrant oils.

“The Kandadal opened his hands. When he lifted them, the new being rose from the ruin of the ekeksengek’s flesh, floating into the air. *You are bound*, the Kandadal said. *Go, until you are called and made use of*. The new ekeksengek, which was not truly man nor woman until commanded but surely oily, vanished.

“*You are free*, said the Kandadal. *Rise*. He closed and lowered his hands.

“The heap of discarded bone and skin and raw organs and meat at his feet stirred. Over long, slow breaths it organized itself, until at last it rose to its feet, clumsy and uncertain,

not quite ugly, not quite beautiful, entirely human. *Who am I?* it asked, touching its mouth in wonder at its own voice.

"Yourself," said the Kandadal, and embraced the creature."

My pipe had gone out. I did not understand the ladyboy's story. She turned away from the gardens below and beyond the verandah. She was no more than a dark shadow impressed against shadows less dark, but I was aware her hands had moved to the tucks and pleats of fabric at her waist. Undone, the sarong crumpled down her legs.

I could not make out her nakedness: whether she was young man or young woman, one masquerading as the other, or both, or neither. "Go to your bed," the ladyboy said. "Perhaps the ekeksengek will return."

He did not. I believe he did not. I slept heavily, deep into the afternoon, troubled by thoughts but not dreams. When I woke again, the smell of my raw self polluted with sweats and oils and emissions and fragrances revolted me. I took myself to the sunken baths. The basil tungs soap had not been stolen from its hiding place. I bathed, I bathed, I sluiced and rinsed my skin, and then I returned to my bungalow, where I found Mefao folding my rich Trebter garments and other belongings into the cedar chest. "You are summoned," she said, "to attend the queen on the Jade Stool in Defre-ua-Bodo."

I was not granted time to speak to my sister—of course I did not see the ladyboy or her Kevveller commander before being ushered out of the subcontinental canton, onto a sampan that bore me down the canal to the anchorage. Here I was taken aboard a lateen-rigged Avengi coaster. Here Mefao bade me farewell.

"I am sent unaccompanied?" I had not believed I could be made more bewildered. "Who will speak for me—to me?"

Clambering back into the waiting sampan, Mefao offered no reply I heard. The queen's eunuch smiled unpleasantly. I turned away, saying to myself, *Perhaps I am being*

abducted, or perhaps he is incapable of smiling pleasantly. A smaller boat towed the coaster into the channel and the sails were raised.

My chest and I were deposited in a cabin smaller than the one in which I crossed the oceans from Trebt but more comfortable. A sailor brought me sealed flasks of arrack. Before I drunkened myself, I rooted through the chest. Finding the ironwood casket readily enough, I carried it to the bench below the cabin's open window. I turned the small key in the casket's lock. The fresh tungs odor of basil rose as I opened the lid.

They had taken my diptych—my portable chapel, my book of devotions—my memorial to lost, to never known, to impossible love.

They. I could not comprehend who *they* could be, how they could be so cruel, so clever. How they could know. The brick of basil-oil soap sat atop the futile contract of affrèment. Its seeping fats and oils discolored the paper, made it translucent. *One bread, one salt.* From the window swept in brackish salt as the estuary met the sea, but the new odor could not dismiss the basil. *One meat, one wine.* I wrenched the seal from an arrack flask, drank, swallowed, coughed. *One purse, one life until death, alone.*

There was nothing for it but to drink, since I had been provided drink.

Sitting at the open window, I drank and smoked my pipe and watched as the vessel sailed away from Folau. When we passed Ekada-fo, the quarantine isle, I noted the Sjolussene roundships at anchor, ashore the stone warehouse, the bungalows much like those of the canton, and wondered about the fate of the beautiful woman I had met at my sister's banquet. Would her masters treat her as cruelly for not being chosen by the queen's eunuch as unknown persons treated me? Maudlin, I smoked, I drank, I recalled my earlier thought and imagined I had not been selected for

the queen's delectation but the eunuch's, I was abducted and the Sjolussene beauty even now travelled toward Defre.

Past Ekada-fo, the boat embarked upon the sea, threading north and east along the clifly, islanded coast. At some point I was brought food, some of which I ate. At night when the light of the crescent moon glimmered a path across the waters, the Oily Man came to me again.

In my disconsolation, the ekeksengek's consolation made me choose to live again. I cannot explain it—it was animal passion only, not love, not affection, not love. When I became aware he had left me, I kindled a small fire in the gimballed brass bowl mounted to the wall and burned the vain contract of affrèment. The oils from the soap made it flare up fast. The gold ink of the vow sparked and popped like black powder.

The Oily Man returned the next night. And the next.

In daylight, I was treated absently but well. Being upon the sea did not sicken me. The door of my cabin possessed no lock—I was not prevented from venturing abovedecks where nobody spoke my language. The handsome, wiry sailors with their sarongs hitched up over their thighs laughed when I made to speak one garbled word or another of their tongue—laughed again when the sun's heat encouraged me to kirtle my own sarong high like theirs. The eunuch kept to his cabin, if he was actually aboard. The food was rough and ready, highly spiced, satisfying. There was no end to the arrack.

The fourth day of my voyage, perhaps the fifth, the warm winds became fitful, the sailors agitated. The captain (I believed he was captain) bellowed orders. Hastily, the sails were brought down and I saw a vast tumble of black and brown cloud looming out to sea.

I could not aid the crew's efforts, I could not speak or be spoken to, so I retreated to my cabin and dogged the wooden shutters closed, trapping the heady perfume of tuberose that rose from my bed, my skin. Waves whose fury I

could scarcely imagine smashed against the bulkheads like mighty fists or mallets striking a brass gong. I made myself nearly stupefied with drink before the storm-troubled thrashing of the boat could make me ill. A great crash echoed over the roar of the winds and pounding seas, my bed threw me to the deck, a flood of cool salt water sluiced me down. I cried out as I was overwhelmed. I forgot.

I believed the ekeksengek pulled me from the sea. He was strong and careful, glistening as if with oil. The salt of the ocean would have overpowered his fragrance.

I slept—if it was sleep—woke, slept, woke, slept again. He held me in his arms, tender and kind.

My throat was raw, salted, my lungs heavy and chilled. I must have knocked my head before the boat broke up around me, if that is what it did. My vision was perturbed, uncertain. In the few pleasant days that I perambulated about the deck nearly naked, my pale Trebter skin had burned and blistered, though I kept myself too drunk to know it. My gentle rescuer did not permit me to rise from his bed for how many days I could not count. He swabbed my ruined skin with oils and unguents, none of which smelled of tuberose. He trickled slippery decoctions of oil, honey, balms, and something like wine down my throat. He never spoke, but only held me close so that I could hear the voice of his beating heart.

Then he lifted me up and supported me to a light-filled absence that must be an open doorway. Close at hand I could make no sense of anything I attempted to view, least of all my comforter, but through the door I discovered I could understand distant vistas.

We stood high upon a clifftop. Far away across a deep blue-green strait scalloped with light reared another rough cliff, crowned with vividly leafed and blossomed forest. My companion turned me to one side, and I saw another high cliff across another strait. This, though, was an island thrust

up from the sea, narrow but impossibly tall. Upon a ledge near the forested crest, I saw what seemed to be a small dwelling hacked out of stone and wood. About the sheer edges of the ledge were planted slender staves, and from their tops fluttered bouquets of ribbons in many colors, torn and tossed by unceasing winds.

My hand was placed upon a warm wooden cylinder of just the girth to close my fingers about. When I peered up its great length, I made out the thrashing tangle of colored ribbons. Then my silent protector led me again within doors, tended my ills. After some days or weeks when, though I could not yet see clearly, I was much mended, he began to teach me again the ekeksengek's lessons. By now I had understood he was merely a man like myself.

We do not speak often. If he has a personal name, my companion, I have never learned it, nor has he ever inquired mine. I have learned a great deal else over these days and months and years, however.

I know the Kandadal's eleven precepts. That is, I know the words that represent them—well enough that I have translated them into the language of my youth and written them down. Nobody will ever read the manuscript but myself. I know the words. Their meanings I sometimes comprehend.

I know the eleven colors of the Kandadal's ribbons and which roots, barks, or flowers that grow on our island can make dyes of three of those colors. The others we acquire from generous men and women of the mainland. I know the technique of weaving the white ribbons we dye—planting and tending the vegetable-wool, carding the wool free of its seeds, spinning it into thread. We use a very narrow loom suitable only for ribbons, for the Kandadal understood no reason people should not be naked if they were not cold.

I know how to gather foodstuffs in the forest, on the rocky shore and the ledges of the cliffs. I have learned to sail our

small boat and gather fishes from the sea.

I know the number of tall, spiring islands in our archipelago: one hundred seventy-three. I do not know whether the number is significant. Eighty-seven house persons like ourselves, nameless if not solitary.

I know how to be silent. I know how to be still. I know how to be grateful. I know how to be alone, although I do not prefer it. Nor does my companion.

I know many, not all—one day I will know all—of the recorded stories of the Kandadal's life and career. In no chronicle or scripture nor my companion's memory have I discovered the tale the ladyboy told me.

I know how to forget the ekeksengek and all my youth and all my family. And Rosecq. At last I choose not to.

I know. I know. I know. To be. To be. To be. To love.

Dirty

Stephen Pope

I can still hear them. The wind isn't blowing hard enough to make the corn really rustle, so I can still hear the sounds that they make, squealing and grunting.

That morning I had tucked Victoria Lee into my purse, wrapping her in a white handkerchief to keep her from getting scratched, so she could keep me company. She's a tall, smart woman who's been abandoned in a huge, dark forest where the trees are so huge, they really do look like giant corn stalks. She's not scared, though. She's brave and she knows how to take care of herself.

It's all dirt back here, but that's okay. I stay on my feet, crouching down, so I won't get my knees dirty.

A big, black beetle comes down the row, walking on a half-dozen legs that look like shiny black sticks. Victoria Lee walks up it, and the beetle clicks at her. She clicks her tongue right back at it, asking the way out of the dark forest. It's not easy to understand beetle-clicking, but she learns that if she follows this row, she'll find a cave. If she can sing a pretty enough song, the giant frog who lives inside the cave will come out and show her the way out of the forest.

"Becky!"

Before Victoria Lee sets off to find the cave, she takes a moment to really look at the forest, at all the giant trees in neat, straight rows, growing tall enough for you to look down through the clouds at the whole world, if you were brave enough to climb to the top.

"Becky!"

It's a beautiful day. All Victoria Lee can hear is the wind.

I ride in the back. Our car is an old one, with one big, wide seat up front and one in the back, and Mom asks me if I want to ride up in the front next to her. I remind her, again, that I'm twelve, and at my age it's safer for me to ride in the middle of the back seat with my seat belt buckled.

I'm glad they have the windows open. That way all I can smell is the dust and the corn as the air blows through the car. They stink, Mom and Ray both. They stink of dirt and of sweat, and of what they were doing while I was imagining with Victoria Lee. The inside of the car stinks too, but only of dirt and old, greasy food. They didn't climb on top of each other in the car. They went behind the old barn, with a blanket that they keep in the trunk. That's where they always go when we take this road and Ray suggests we stop and walk for a bit. I walk far enough away where I don't have to hear them, and they make noises like pigs.

I used to ride in the front seat, sitting next to Mom and talking to her. We would take our lunch into Union, and eat it in the park by the lake. Then we would go to the library or the museum and look at all the same old paintings and statues that we had seen a dozen times before. Anytime that any of the other girls in school say they did something with their mother, I listen to the way they say it. They never sound like they had the same kind of fun that Mom and I did. Then Ray came.

He's not my father. My father was someone Mom knew once, a long time ago. He told her that he loved her, and she believed him. I've never seen him. He probably left her so he could have sex with someone else.

When we get back to the house, Ray carries everything in himself. He even holds the side door open for Mom and me. As I pass, I can smell her on him.

Our house is like an old, giant castle, and Mom says that our family has owned it ever since it was built, after the Civil War. The bottom step at the front door is raised up so people could step out of carriages onto it, the rooms on the bottom floor all open up into each other, and it's the only house, or anything else, for miles and miles along the highway. All the doors have little brass plates with numbers on them, and there's a cupboard in the kitchen where you can blow into different tubes and then talk to almost any room in the house. It has three stories, an attic, and a cellar. There are thirty-five rooms, counting the attic but not the cellar, because it's just a dark, dirty hole. It used to be a manor house, a long time ago, back when our family owned the land all along the road that became the highway. Now it's a big, empty place with funny smells and old pictures.

Mom and I used to live all by ourselves. She worked at a day-care center in Union and sometimes she would rent a room to people passing through. There was never more than one or two of them in the house at a time, though, because the highway isn't used very much anymore and we're so far away from town. We didn't have much money for new clothes and other things, but we never went hungry and we always used to have fun making up our own stories and games, and playing dress-up with all the old things that are all over the house. On school days, the bus would drop me off and I would make dinner on the old gas stove. When it was ready, I would set it on a tray in the living room so Mom could sit on the couch, take off her shoes, and enjoy it as soon as she got home. I always knew that she was driving up to the house by the way that the gravel crunched under the tires of the car, and could tell that it was her and not someone else by the squeaking of the loose boards in the porch. If she fell asleep watching TV on the couch, I would turn it off and put a blanket over her, then go get her alarm clock from her bedroom and put it on the little table by the couch so that she wouldn't be late for work. Whenever we

were bored, we would go up the last set of stairs and into the attic, which is as big as the whole top story. We could bring some iced tea and open all the windows that weren't stuck to let air and light in, and explore all the old chests and boxes and wardrobes. Mom once said that she used to explore it with her mommy too, and that she still hasn't looked in half of them. I got all of my really pretty dresses from up there, and I don't care that they look different than dresses made today.

Now Ray is here and there's always banging and sawing going on somewhere in the house. Mom laughs so hard that it hurts my ears, and she and Ray go to bed early and wake up late. He just showed up one day, walking along the road with an old backpack on his shoulder and patches on the knees of his blue jeans. I remember seeing him walking up by the highway and wondering how far he had walked, because he wasn't coming from Union but from the other way. When Mom noticed him, she said, "How strange." He walked right up to the little gate by the road where our mailbox is, and he smiled when he saw we were looking at him. He said good afternoon, and he asked Mom if she had any rooms for rent. Mom laughed, the pretty way that she used to, and he laughed too, and asked what was funny. She wasn't mean about it, but she pointed to the sign that was right next to him. Then he smiled the kind of smile that a dumb person uses to make himself look smart, and said that he couldn't read. He said that he was a carpenter, and that he didn't have much money, but that if he could stay for a couple of days then he could fix all the cracked boards in the porch. Mom said she couldn't rent a room to someone who looked like a boy running away from home, and he called her a goober, saying he was on his way back home. He talked funny, and I think Mom thought he was pretending, but he's been here six months now, and that's really how he talks.

Now I have a new room, and I keep it clean, even though I don't like it. Roy changed all the boards on the floor and put new paper on the walls. He even made me a big bed with a picture of a fairy princess carved into the headboard, but I still don't like it, or him. My old room was right next door to Mom's, against the same side of the house where the wind always blows, and on the nights when Mom slept downstairs I would go up to my room after doing the dishes and lie in bed, listening to the wind talk to our house by blowing against it and our house talking back by creaking and moaning. Most of the time, if I got scared in the middle of the night, I could knock on the wall by my bed and Mom would knock back. Now my room is bigger and I have a bathroom of my own, but I'm too far away to knock on the wall and have Mom hear me, and I'm not far enough away to keep from hearing her and Ray when they go to bed.

I'm never having sex. Never. No one thinks I'm pretty, but I suspect boys try to have sex with ugly girls if pretty girls won't let them. Mom tells me I'm pretty, but I know she tells me that because she loves me. I looked at myself in the mirror once, before Ray came, just to make sure that I am ugly. My hair is blond, and a little curly, but I don't have any breasts yet, and I hope I never do. My eyes are a little funny-looking, and my chin doesn't stick out like other people's do. Some of the girls in my class laugh at me and ask me if my mommy is my sister, too, but they're just dumb. Mom was young when she had me, and I know I'm part of the reason that her mom left right after I was born, and why my mom never finished school.

Mom talked to me about it, about sex, once. We were eating sandwiches on the card table in the kitchen and talking about the other kids in my class, and when I told her that a boy had been caught with a girl's panties in his pocket she asked me if I knew why boys liked girls. She said I was too young to have anything to do with it, but that there things I needed to know. She told me how my body

worked and different things that a boy might want to do, including all the really dirty stuff. She said that you didn't have to love someone to have sex with them, but that you better know about all the problems that it can cause. She told me three times to remember that sex made babies, and that it can make a baby no matter how much you don't want it to. Mom said that she made some mistakes about that when she was younger, and she didn't want me making them too. After Ray started sleeping in her bedroom, I asked her if she was making a mistake again, and she laughed, her dumb laugh, and she told me I didn't know what I was talking about.

As soon as I hear him in the hall, I go to my door and open it just a little bit. I crouch down on the floor and watch him while he measures a thick board with the old metal triangle that he brought with him. He's always smiling. He's pulled up all the boards in the floor that had splinters sticking out, replaced the shingles on the roof, and done something down in the basement that made the front door and the door in the kitchen not stick anymore. It's taken him six months, and he's smiled the whole time. If I have to be around him while he's working, he smiles a different smile while he sneaks looks at me. One time I told Mom about that other smile, the one that makes me feel funny and makes my face all red, and she got really mad and told me to stop distracting Ray when he's working. So I took the picture book that I had made for her, the one with all the stuff from when I was a baby, and burned it in the oven one night after they had gone to bed and were making lots of noise.

I lock my door and go over to the corner of the room where I keep my house. It has three stories, thirty-five rooms, and an attic. All of the doors really open, and all of the furniture is real. I can leave it together and feel like a great big giant looking inside our house, or I can open it all the way up where it covers my whole table and pull my chair up

and imagine that I'm inside a perfect house, a house that no one ever changes. There are lots of old pictures in the real attic upstairs, and I know that my house looks just like ours used to look, a long time ago.

My house has a family, too. Victoria Lee lives inside it, along with her mother, Grace, and her sister, Mandy, who is just a baby. They each have their own rooms, and Victoria Lee has a tea room with a table and cupboard, and Mandy has a playroom with lots of toys.

My house came from the attic, along with Victoria Lee and her family. Mom said that my grandmother, and her grandmother, and little girls in our family going back over a hundred years have played with it. There's a trunk up in the attic with other people, too. It has fathers, and uncles and aunts, and grandmothers, and dogs and cats, and even a couple of old cars. Mom has said that I can play with any of them, but that I have to be careful, because they're all made of wood, and they were all made special, not like they make stuff now. That's part of the reason our house used to look so bad. Mom says even back when our family could afford to fix it, it was hard to find someone who knew how to do it the right way.

But my house doesn't look bad. I keep every room dusted and wiped. I never take it outside and I never let anyone else touch it before I make sure that their hands are clean. Mom used to wash her hands after lunch and play with me, but she usually takes a nap now. Ray has only looked at my house once, and I didn't let him touch it because he had dirt all over his hands. He looked at it a long time, not saying anything, and when he was done he just smiled at me with his dumb smile, but he smiled at me like I was dumb too.

I'm not dumb. I know he's making my mom make another mistake.

We have chicken and mashed potatoes for dinner that night. Mom stayed in the kitchen, cooking, ever since we got

home, and she made too much. Ray has been making tables and chairs and selling them to the people in town, so we have more money than we used to, and he's always hungry. Now Mom has to cook a lot more than she used to. She says she doesn't mind, but I can tell that she worries when she cooks.

"How are your beans, sweetie?"

"They're okay."

"Your mom sure is a good cook, Becky. If we keep eating like this, pretty soon we'll have to butter ourselves up just to fit through the door."

I don't answer. I want to finish and take Victoria Lee out to the back porch before it gets dark. She can be the only passenger on a giant ship that is stranded in the middle of a huge, empty desert.

He just keeps talking.

"You know, it's not too early to start thinkin' about somebody's thirteenth birthday. There's a place in the backyard, in the corner of the old fence, that would look awfully pretty with a swing set."

"I'd really like a CD player. My radio is starting to sound funny."

"A big one, like a bench, that you and some of your friends could fit in. I'd put a roof on it, too, just like the old ones."

I look at him, right in his stupid face.

"No."

"Honey, CDs are expensive. We're doing a little better than we were before, but we need to get the rest of the house fixed up. Then we can get more boarders."

"Aw, let's just see how the place looks with just us first, before we go talking about that."

"If Ray made you a swing set, Becky, you could have some of your friends from school over."

"Yeah! You could have a big, fancy party and all dress up!"
I feel my face getting red, and it's their fault.

"No one can come to my party because my birthday is on a school day."

"Then we can have it that weekend. Becky, you need to start trying to make friends at school. You need to find other places to spend time."

I eat another spoon of mashed potatoes, and then I very carefully wipe my hands on my napkin. I take Victoria Lee out of my pocket.

"May I be excused, please?"

"Sweetheart, you've hardly eaten anything."

"Don't you wanna try some of that good chicken?"

"I don't like fried chicken. It gets my hands all greasy."

"Becky, your momma worked really hard to cook that for you."

"She made it for you! She does everything for you! You get to make her cook all day, you get to cut up our house, and you get to fuck her all night! I hate you!"

I push away from the table, but my chair is one of the old ones, and I feel one of the legs break as I lean on it. I don't want to fall on the floor and get my dress dirty, so I grab the table. But all I get is the tablecloth, and I fall anyway. A plate of greasy fried chicken, sticky mashed potatoes, and sloppy kidney beans comes down on top of me. A glass of cold milk falls on top of everything.

"Oh, Christ."

I feel a piece of chicken on my neck. There are potatoes and beans all over me, and I can feel the milk soaking the dress against my skin. Mom is still in her chair with her hands over her mouth.

Ray is smiling, the other smile. He looks like he just stole a cookie from someone else's jar.

"Bastard." I want to scream at him, but the words don't come. My right hand is shaking, because I have Victoria Lee in it, and I can feel that something is wrong.

"Don't move, honey. I'll get a towel."

Mom runs into the kitchen, but I'm not paying attention to her anymore. I'm sitting up in the filthy puddle and holding my hands together. They're shaking, but I'm holding them together as gently as I can. I know what happened, but I want it to not have happened. I want it more than I want a CD player, or my old room, or than I want Ray to go away and for Mom and me to be together again. I want it more than anything else in the world.

But even before I open my hands and see it for myself, I know what I have. Victoria Lee, her head broken off and rolling around in my palm.

I lie in bed, trying to fall asleep and not caring if I do or not. I know Victoria Lee is broken, and even if I dream of her I'll wake up and remember that she's broken.

I hate my mom. I hate her, and Ray, and all the kids in my class, and all the rest of the world. If Mom or Ray owned a gun I'd steal it and kill them, then I'd stand outside in the morning and wait for the school bus like everything was okay. When I got to school I'd shoot every dirty boy and dumb girl in my class in the stomach and spit in their faces while they were dying. I would kill as many other stupid people as I could before they killed me. I know that's mean, but I don't care.

I hate Ray so much. I remember the first night he was here, he spent all the time from lunch until dinner cutting the dead trees in the backyard into firewood. He ate his food on the back porch, and then went back to work. He cut and sawed until the sun went down and I had to go to bed. I could see him from the window of my old bedroom, and when he was done Mom invited him in to share some iced tea. He took off all his clothes and poured a bucket of water over his body. Then he walked inside and I heard them talking downstairs. When they went into Mom's bedroom next to mine I could still hear them, and I thought about how Ray was so skinny with lots of lines from his muscles. I

listened to them, and I made fists with my hands and my stomach got tight. I started squeezing my arms and legs and my head, and I thought I was trying to break all my bones, until I started to shake and it felt like I wet the bed. Then I threw up.

The house is quiet. If I tried, I might be able to imagine that Mom and Ray are gone and I can go sleep in my old room, but I know they're still here.

Then I hear them coming down the hall. I can hear both of their footsteps, and I can hear Mom whispering something to Ray.

When he knocks on my door I don't answer. I know he'll come in anyway.

"Becky? You up?"

Mom whispers something to him again, and my door opens. I don't move and keep facing the wall. He comes in and gets my chair, then sits down by my bed. Even with my back to him I can tell he still smells like grease and chicken.

"Your mom's worried about you. She has been for a while now. I guess I knew that. I just wanted everything to be OK. But it isn't, and it's time I did something to fix it.

"I guess it's been hard on you, not knowing anything about your dad. I knew mine. He was the best man I ever knew. I try to think about what he would say every time I talk to you. You and your mom have been getting along just fine all these years, and then I walk in. I guess that's pretty scary.

"I don't know what you're thinking half the time, and that's 'cause you tend to keep your mouth shut. You only talk when you've got something to say, an' then you say it, an' that's that. I guess that's another reason you don't like me. My mouth runs all the time, an' don't I know it. You say you hate me for making your mom cook, an' because I keep fixing up the house like it used to be, an' well, for that other thing you said. If those are your reasons, those are your reasons. I can't change how I am.

“But I don’t think you say everything you want to say. If you did, I don’t think you’d start screaming at your mom an’ me for asking you to eat some fried chicken. You’re a lot smarter than me, so I don’t know what you’re afraid of. But I can guess. An’ if I had to guess, I’d say you’re afraid of your mom lovin’ me. You’re afraid of her lovin’ me every day and every night and every next day that there ever will be. An’ if that happened, you think that one day she’d decide that she loves me more than she does you, an’ that morning you’d come downstairs and there wouldn’t be breakfast on the table. There wouldn’t be a car in the drive and there wouldn’t be anyone in the house, except you all alone.”

I know he can’t see the tears that come out of my eyes, but I choke just a little bit, hoping he doesn’t hear it.

“Becky, honey, that’s not ever going to happen. You’re never going to be alone in this house, I promise. I think you’re jumping the gun just a bit, thinking you know how things are gonna work out with your momma and me. Sometimes grown-ups get lonely, and what they do isn’t the same as when two people are gonna get married and have a whole, wonderful life together. I know you don’t have a lot of friends of your own at your school, probably ‘cause you’re smarter than everyone there all put together. Your mom worries about that, but I don’t. I know you got your own friends, like that pretty lady you always carry in your purse. Friends like that can do more than people think. The first friends I ever had were a bunch of marching soldiers carved out of wood, just like your lady. I know how much they can mean.”

He gets up, and his hand feels like sandpaper as he puts something in my palm and folds my fingers over it. I can feel what it is, but I sit up and cradle it so I can see by the light from my window.

“You fixed her.”

“Aw, she wasn’t broken that bad. I just drilled a hole in both pieces and tapped a peg in there with some glue to

hold it. I hope you like how she looks, 'cause I had to repaint her, too."

I don't forget how he looked at me at dinner, or that other way he looks at me sometimes, and I try to think about all the reasons I have to hate him. But now he's looking at me like a little boy who doesn't have any friends, and think about how much I hate that feeling while I hug him.

"I don't want to take your mom away from you, honey. I don't want you and me or her and you to fight any more. Everyone gets sad when people fight. I just want to stay here an' do the work that I should be doin' and watch you grow into a special little lady."

"Promise?"

"I promise, Becky. Now you go ahead and get some sleep. It's getting late."

I lie there in the dark, holding Victoria Lee against my chest and listening to the wind blow against the house. I know that I'll still get mad at Ray tomorrow when I see him kiss my mom, and I don't think I'll ever like the way he smells, but maybe I don't have any real reasons to hate him. Maybe I made up some of those reasons.

I'm almost having a beautiful dream where our house is a giant castle in the middle of an enchanted forest with elves and fairies and dragons when I wake up. I was trying to imagine what a magic swing set would do, a magic swing set that had a roof, when I might have remembered something. That part didn't feel like imagining.

I find my nightgown, and take a peek out my door before leaving my room. There are no lights on anywhere.

I tiptoe through the house, feeling like a ghost in my old white gown as I float up one set of stairs to the third floor with all the empty, quiet bedrooms. I can see well enough from the starlight coming in through all the windows to find the second set of stairs, hidden in the back of the hall.

In the attic, I have to stop and wait for my eyes to get used to the dark. This is the part of the house where there is never enough light. After a minute, I can just barely see the chest at the side of the walkway between all the boxes.

I open it carefully, crouching so I don't get the dust from the floor on my gown. There are people inside, daddies and mommies and sisters and brothers. There is a funny-looking bicycle with a big front wheel and lots of horses with pretty saddles. I remember coming up here a long time ago to choose the beds and chairs and all the other furniture that I wanted to have in my house. Mommy helped me carefully pack all the old things away, all the things that had been sitting in my house in the years before I was old enough to play with it.

I find the bed, the one with the princess carved into the headboard. Even wrapped up, it still has dust on it. The wood is old and dry.

But I keep looking. I take out carriages and soldiers and dogs and tables until I find what I'm looking for. It's wrapped up in an old cloth napkin, and it looks just like I dreamed it. If it was real, there would be enough room for four little girls to swing inside it, four little princesses swinging under a white roof.

In the dark, I wonder about all the other things from the trunk. The dining-room chairs that are in my house right now look just like the old one that I had been sitting in at the table, but they also look like the new ones that Ray made. We have a new wooden bench out on the front porch instead of the broken, old, plastic one. Now I remember why Mommy looked funny sitting on it right after Ray finished it late one afternoon. There is a picture in one of the empty bedrooms that shows my great grandmother as a little girl sitting on a bench that looks just like it, and I remember before Ray came I asked Mommy what happened to it, and Mommy told me that my grandmother got mad one night, and she dragged it out into the front yard and set it on fire. I look at

all the mommies and daughters and babies, and wonder how even though some of them wear clothes that people were wearing when I was a baby, and some of them wear clothes that people wore when our house was new, none of them are too tall or too short to fit in my house. Some of them are cracked and have peeling paint, but all their bases are the same, and they all stand the same way.

Then I take out the daddies. There aren't many of them. I take them and put them side by side on the floor in front of the chest. I can see a little better in the dark now, and it's easy to see that they look alike. One daddy in a white shirt and pants with suspenders has a hammer in his hand, and he's smiling just like the daddy in the lumberjack shirt with the cap on his head and the ax. The daddy that wears the overalls has a saw with a funny handle, and it's the same saw that the daddy with the bell bottoms and headband carries.

They all have the same face, skinny with happy eyes. They all look like little boys with grown up bodies.

He smiles at me, like we're sharing a secret. I didn't hear him come into the attic but he's crouching down next to me and smiling. He has something in his hand, and he puts it next in line in the row of daddies. It has on patched blue jeans and a tee shirt, and a metal triangle in its hand. It's smiling, like it wants to eat me.

He takes my hand and lifts me up so fast that we're going down the attic stairs right away. The hall and the rooms go by in a blur as he pulls me behind him without saying a word, my feet barely touching the floor. I want to believe that I'm imagining all this, and that I can just open my eyes and be back in my bed, but I know I can't. I'm afraid.

In my bedroom he picks me up and puts me in my bed. For a long time he just stands there, looking at me and chewing on his lips. I wonder if my mom was scared like this.

Then he gets my chair from in front of my house and sits down. He leans close and whispers to me in the half-

darkness.

"I bet you're thinking, aren't you? I knew the first minute I saw you that you could think things through like your mom never could. I used to know your mom, a long time ago. She used to be able to think pretty good, but nothin' like you can, I bet.

"Can I tell you a story? I'm not much good at makin' em' up, but that doesn't mean I can't tell a good one. I been around a bit longer than you, an' I've seen stuff. The story I'm gonna tell is my favorite one, an' maybe it'll be yours too.

"Did you know that little toy house of yours is just as old as this one? It's true. The man that built this place for your family had a boy, and that boy made it as a present for a girl that he loved more than anything else in the whole world.

"You see, that boy's family didn't have much money, but his daddy made sure that they had everything he could give them. He taught him how to carve wood and put on paint too, so that when one of them broke he could just find a good piece of wood and fix it or make another. That way he always had the same toys, no matter what."

"What sort of toys?"

"He made his boy the best-looking set of toy soldiers you've ever seen, all standing up straight in gray coats with long rifles and sharp bayonets." Ray smoothed down the sheets by my side.

"One day, his daddy started working for a rich man. The man had fought in the war and his old house had gotten burned up, but that was okay, because he still had lots of money for a new one. He hired the boy's daddy to make it, and every day the boy went with him to help. That's where he met the man's daughter.

"Oh, she was pretty—"

"Pretty how?"

"Well, she had long blonde hair that was all twisted up into lots and lots of little curls. The first time that boy saw

her, you know what he did?”

I shake my head.

“He forgot that he was supposed to be leading the mule while it pulled the scrap wagon, and that mule kicked him clean off his feet and into the mud. Everyone laughed at him, even his daddy, who probably knew why his boy had lost his head for a minute. But that girl didn’t laugh. She walked right over to him wearing her pretty white dress and asked him if he wanted her to have her butler fetch him a bucket of water so he could wash off, then she smiled at him, and oh golly, all he could hear was angels singing.

“Pretty soon the boy was sneaking away from the work whenever he could, just so he could see that pretty girl. She’d bring something fancy for lunch and the boy would bring the knife that his daddy had given him and he’d carve a new toy for the little girl. It took well over a year to build a house back then, so they got to know each other pretty good.

“A lot of things were different back then. The boy was only sixteen, but that was old enough in those days to have a home and a family. The girl was a little bit younger than he was, but she loved him just as much as he loved her, and when two people love each other, there’s nothing wrong with anything that they do. You still get mad about me sleepin’ in your mom’s bed, but sometimes grown-ups do that when they’re around each other a lot, ’cause it’s nice, and ’cause sometimes the world just seems like it’s got nothing but pain in it. They do it when they love each other, too, only then it’s extra special. You’re still a little too young to understand, but you’ll be old enough real soon.”

“You’re talking sex—”

“Shh,” Ray’s finger is on my lips, shushing me. His touch is too warm and pressed down hard enough to keep my head still. But I don’t whimper.

“That boy was gonna do the right thing, too. He was going to make that girl his wife and find a place somewhere where

he could build a house just for her and they could be together and have lots of babies. So when that big house was finished, he put on his Sunday best and went callin' to see her folks. He went in there with his head held high and his hat in his hand, and he asked to see the man of the house and his wife. In the parlor he explained to them both how he felt about their daughter and asked for their permission to marry her.

"Now her father was a great man. You could tell that just by bein' in the room with him. He'd fought in the war, and looking at him, you felt like you were looking at a king. But he was old, older than he should've been. Sometimes stuff scared him that a grown man wouldn't be scared of, so maybe some things he'd seen in the war had scared him so bad, he was still afraid of them. If you wanted to say good morning to him or talk to him about cornbread fresh out of the oven, he'd give you a smile that made you feel warm inside, and he'd talk to you like he didn't have any more money than you. But if you needed to talk to him about serious stuff, stuff that you had to think about for a bit or you might be a year or two down the road before you woke up and figured out you'd made a mistake, then he might need to sit down for a bit and talk about somethin' else. Asking him what was wrong only made it worse, and if you did that he'd turn his head like he was looking out the window so you couldn't see how he looked like he was going to cry.

"His wife was the one who stepped in an' made sure the work got done. She could read and write, and she wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty or to call a man out. When the boy explained his intentions, you know what she did? She smiled at him like he was already a part of the family. She asked him to join her in the family room, to have a seat in one of the chairs that he'd helped peg together and had her man bring them both some cold lemonade from the kitchen."

I wanted to ask him to get me a glass of lemonade. No, water. I felt something like thirst.

“Oh she was just as nice as she could be to the boy. She asked him about how long he had worked with his daddy, about what he liked to do, about how his family lived, and about what kind of plans he had for the future. She sat there smilin’ and listenin’ to him go on about what it was like to set out before sun up with an ax over your shoulder, about how you had to cut oak different than you cut pine, and how he thought it would be great to get some of that free land everyone was talkin’ about and get a house built, if he could find a piece with good trees on it. She listened and smiled and kept askin’ questions while he sat there and laid everything out, and then she asked him where her daughter was going to fit into these plans of his.

“It didn’t matter what he said, or how many different ways he tried to explain it to her, her mind was already made up. It had probably been made up before he ever said a word. When he tried to tell her about swappin’ mesquite wood to butchers for smoking and getting some good beef in return, she let him know that she was seeing that her daughter got a taste for oranges, ’cause they were good for her complexion. She asked him where he got the clothes he was wearing, and how he was going to afford satin dresses and silk petticoats for her little girl because she just couldn’t wear any other kind. Then she started talkin’ about French tutors and music lessons and a hundred other things that made that boy’s head ache. She kept talkin’ on and on, and she didn’t want to hear that boy explaining how stuff like that didn’t matter, that he loved that girl and that he just wanted to marry her.

“You know, it doesn’t matter what all they talked about, or didn’t talk about that afternoon. What matters is what happened, and nothin’ that happened that afternoon was any good, for anyone. That same man who’d brought that boy some lemonade in a pretty glass, who’d smiled at him

and said 'good morning' to him every day for almost a year ended up throwin' him outta the house after givin' him a black eye and a bloody nose. The girl's family went back on their word and wouldn't pay the boy's daddy all that they owed him for building their nice house. They started tellin' lies to everyone for miles around about that boy treating their daughter like she was his wife when she didn't want him to.

"Back then you couldn't have folk's thinkin' you're the sort to do things like that. It wasn't like it is today where people would just get the police and let them handle it. They might send for the sheriff, or they might just all get together and come take it outta your hide. Maybe they'd burn you with hot tar, or maybe they'd just string you up from a tall tree. That boy had to leave, even though it made him and his mom and dad sadder than they'd ever been in their whole lives."

"Did he leave?"

Ray frowned and nodded. He looked as if he was ready to cry.

"He left, all right. Left his family, and his toys, and the home he'd lived in his whole life. But that night he came back into town and he snuck up to the new house by the road and into the girl's room, and they were together one last time. He talked to her for a long while, and he promised that someday he'd be back.

"It wasn't easy for that boy, goin' out on the road and finding a new life, but he was young, strong, and he wasn't afraid of work. He took a few tools with him, and after a while he got a few more. He lived as good as a boy on his own could, and sometimes it seemed like the days just dragged on, and sometimes he'd blink his eyes and a year would be gone.

"One day, he was back in the same town that he'd been born in. It wasn't anything that he'd planned, but the last man he'd worked for had told him that the folks there

needed a sawyer who could work their new bandsaws. The man with the saw turned out to be one of the people who'd worked for the girl's family, and you know what? He didn't even look twice at the boy. He just asked if he could run the saw and then put him to work. People are funny like that, sometimes. They try to keep a face in their head, and the harder they try, the more they lose it. That's why your mom acts like she never knew me 'fore I walked up to the front gate, probably.

"After a few days, the boy went to the house that he had helped build, asking if they needed any work done around the place, and you know what he found there? There was no more mother to toss him out, and there was no more sad father to talk to, either."

"Where did they go?"

Ray brushed my hair. "The lady who lived in the house was nice, and she seemed a little lonely. She had a daughter, too. She was a beautiful little girl who the boy could recognize in a second. He didn't ask about her father. It wasn't nice to do that in those days.

"So he lived there for a while, he got to know the woman pretty well, and he got to know that sweet young girl. He helped out around the house, which was good, 'cause no one knew that house like he did, and he had to fix a couple of things that other folks had changed. He passed the time working just as hard as he ever had, and when the little girl was old enough he told her that he loved her, and that he wanted her to marry him and stay with him forever. She loved him, too, and the boy thought he'd finally be able to have a family of his own. But the girl's mother got mad at him and made him leave the house. It wasn't as bad as the other time, but she was really mad and screamed a lot of bad words at him. The boy wasn't mad at her, 'cause he knew she was just mad because she didn't understand how much he loved her daughter.

“He traveled around again for a while, but you already know that he went back to the house. He had promised the girl he loved that they would be together, and it didn’t matter how many times he had to leave, he’d always come back to find her, and he always found her at the house.”

My mouth is dry, but I still say it. “He’d get old. Every time he came back he’d have to be older than he was before. He couldn’t just stay a boy, and it couldn’t be the same girl after that much time.”

Ray stops looking at me and moves his eyes just a bit, like he’s looking at something that isn’t there anymore. Then he looks at me again and smiles.

“But he didn’t get older, Becky. He just kept sawing wood and making things, and doing the things that grown-ups do, and when he came back to the house he found his girl again. He loved her, and when two people love each other, everything always turns out right.”

He stands up and smiles again. He’s a little farther away now and I know he’s not going to hurt me.

“Look at me, sittin’ here ready to talk all night. Sometimes I forget that you’re just a little girl, Becky. You’ve got a bit of growin’ to do yet, and you need all the sleep that you’re supposed to have. I’ll let you settle down, and in the morning I’ll let your mom know that things are all better ’tween the two of us.”

I roll over away from him. I don’t want there to be a tomorrow, or a day after. I don’t even hear him move but I feel his breath on my cheek, and I feel his hand on me.

“I was going to save this for later, but I think you should have it now. I made it so you can know just how pretty I think you are.”

He puts something in my hand, and then I hear him close the door. I’m afraid that if I turn around, I’ll see him still in my room. But I have to know, and when I look he’s gone.

There’s still enough light from the window to see what he gave me, and it is pretty. It’s just as pretty as Victoria Lee is,

even though I don't see how he could have made a figure of me and have made it pretty. He made my eyes look like Mommy's. I look at it and I wonder if there was once a real girl who looked like Victoria Lee, and if she ever lived in my room.

I try to sleep, but I can't. I have Victoria Lee in one hand and the figure of me in the other, and for a moment I'm not sure which one is which. Then I remember what Ray's hand felt like on my left hand, and I know that's where the figure of me is, and my thumb rubs it again.

It has breasts.

Winter

Michelle Sagara

Bars were the terrain through which he hunted best.

This hadn't always been the case, but now, with the traffic of busy lives in the press of cities that held more people than any other time in history, the bars were the places where misery gathered. Forced joviality mingled with smoke, tears, and games of desire. He watched, wreathed in shadow, safe in his distance. There were some who gathered here who did not belong: those naïve enough to think that the forced joviality represented anything real.

He liked to observe; he spent days gathering information from the contours of the faces he watched. Each line, each dip of lid or brow, each quirk of lip, telegraphed information about the wearer.

He watched now, although business called. There, at the bar, a man and woman, names unknown, faces distinctly familiar, were beginning an argument. This argument he'd seen before, countless times, among different people; in fact, he had started this one, whispering the name of a woman in the woman's ear and letting it take root in suspicion and insecurity. He caught the glint of pink light on her cheeks and knew that it wasn't the neon. Smiling, he cast his glance, like anew, across the room.

Because, of course, this *was* his business. He was expected, like any laborer, to produce. If he didn't, he would be recalled, and he had grown, as any man, comfortable in his job and his surroundings.

Comfortable enough that the ordinary bored him. What had once been good enough was now inferior, unacceptable. He could not be rushed beyond a certain point, and he had taken pains to make this clear: His was a work of craftsmanship, yes, but it was also a work of art. None who had seen the results could argue this.

Well, no, perhaps one could. But that was long ago, and the criticism, barely remembered, had lost its sting.

He shook his head, to clear it of darkness and anger. This was not the time. The chair in which he sat became confining, and like a creature that knows no cage, he stood and began to walk across the floor, searching in silence—just one of the many.

He found his quarry with little difficulty, but he expected no less; he had been watching the man for three months. He knew where he worked, where he lived, and who he occasionally went home with; he knew what he ate, what he preferred to drink, the style of clothing that best suited him, and the amount of money that he made at his job. He knew his phone number, his credit card numbers, his license-plate number, all the numbers that made his modern life.

He even knew, in the haze of smoke and dimmed light, the lines that his face would take when a stranger, unknown and perhaps unwelcome, joined him at his customary seat.

He was wrong.

“I wondered when you’d get around to introducing yourself.” The young man stood, pushing his chair back noiselessly. He held out a hand. “I believe you know my name already, but in case you don’t, I’m Michael Brandt.”

This was not expected. Michael Brandt, standing at full height, was tall; his eyes, dark and shadowed, were at a level with his visitor’s. He was pale, but winter did that to the skin, and this winter had been particularly harsh.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Brandt. I’m Aazian.” Aazian reached out then and took Michael’s hand firmly in his own.

Shook it, with just the right firmness, at just the right length. Felt a warmth and a pulse that was so clear, it dwarfed all visual impressions.

“Aazian.” Michael nodded quietly. “I don’t suppose you’re interested in a drink?”

Aazian inclined his head, staring. He caught the attention of the waitress with a flick of his fingers in the crowded room. She came, he ordered. His companion grimaced oddly but did not demur. They looked at each other, silently letting the noise of the bar’s multiple conversations and arguments fill the air. Only when the drinks arrived did they attempt to resume a conversation.

“Do you like snow?” Michael asked softly, gazing across the surface of amber liquid as if it were an ocean. He lifted his glass and looked through it at his companion.

“Snow?” What he had been certain of was gone; Aazian raised a brow in surprise before he realized he had let surprise show. He felt a quickening of heat—how odd—and realized that he had, by accident, chosen a better victim than he could have imagined. “Why do you ask?”

“Why don’t you answer?” Michael set the drink down on the table, without touching it.

“Snow is . . . snow. I neither like nor dislike it.”

“Then if you don’t mind, I think it best to dispense with pretense. Let’s go for a walk.” He stood again, and the motion drew his companion to his feet, as if one were steel and the other magnet.

The snow drifted down in thick flakes; it was not bitterly cold, but it was not warm either. Michael Brandt, covered head to toe in wool and leather and other winter items, seemed lodged against the background of ice and night; if he was cold, it didn’t show.

Aazian wore a coat but no hat, no scarf; these were confining. He did not actually wear boots, but no one

noticed this; he was careful when he chose to be. But he cast no shadow in the street lights.

“So, Aazian,” Michael said, his tone casual, his eyes intent, “what do you do for a living?”

It drew a smile from Aazian; the light flickered off his teeth. It was a quaint question and a clumsy opening. He felt better for it, but oddly disappointed as well. “For a living? I shape souls, Michael Brandt.” As he said this, he let his voice *be*. All illusion, all pretense—as Michael had requested—were put aside.

Nothing could fail to hear the voice that Aazian spoke with. Michael heard it. But his reaction was, again, different from the expected. He chuckled almost bitterly. “Figures.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and slowed his stride, turning his cheeks to catch snowflakes and let them melt, like tears, down the side of his face. Under the conic glow of the lamps, he looked almost beatific.

Aazian snarled. It was not a noise he was given to making.

Michael stepped back for a moment, and then shook his head. “I’m not laughing at you,” he said mildly. “Tell me about your work.”

“And what,” Aazian replied, equally mild, “will you give me for my explanation?”

“Is there a price?”

“Of course.”

Michael shrugged. “What do you want?”

Aazian mimed a shrug; it was an exaggeration of motion and silence. “Your soul.”

Michael laughed. “*My* soul?” But his laughter died quickly in the chill of Aazian’s remote expression. “You’ve been following me,” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“Is it just for this?”

Michael Brandt was perhaps the most irritating human that Aazian had ever met. “Yes.”

“Oh.” Then: “I thought you were some sort of serial killer or something.”

“I have no interest in your body, Michael Brandt; it dies, decays, and becomes nothing.” Then he stopped. “If you thought I was ‘some sort of serial killer,’ why did you volunteer to walk with me, here, in isolation?”

Michael Brandt kicked at an imaginary stone. He shrugged. “Maybe you don’t feel all that dangerous.” He looked away. “Or maybe I knew what you were.” And at this, his eyes came back to rest within Aazian’s. They were sharp; it was hard to tell in the light whether Michael’s cheeks were flushed with cold or some other reaction.

Aazian did not refute the words. Instead, he shrugged, a shadow of Michael’s movement. “Very well, you knew. It has happened before.” This was not exactly the truth, but it was as much of the truth as Aazian was willing to share. “What is your price?”

Michael smiled, his lips pale, his eyes unblinking. “Just like that? No song, no dance, no special effects?”

“If you want special effects, you can make that part of your bargain.” But it was said wryly. In spite of himself, Aazian was amused.

“And if I say that I don’t want to sell my soul?”

Aazian shrugged. “Then I find someone else.”

But Michael’s expression told him that they both knew it was a lie. Another devil could utter those words and mean them; Aazian could not. He had chosen. And he had chosen well, he was certain of it. This play of words, this strange, fey expression—they were of a piece with both reticence and challenge. Michael Brandt would fall.

“How can I sell my soul?” Michael asked quietly.

“Why or how?”

“How?”

“It has something to do with choices and permanence; to be honest, I’m not clear at all on the mechanics of the actual

bargain. But basically, it's like any human relationship; you gain something you want, and I gain something I want."

"You gain it forever."

"I gain it," Aazian replied, almost by rote, "for as long as I live. As do you." He held out a hand; the snow that fell against it did not melt.

"What if I ask you for something that you can't give me?"

"Then I don't get your soul. You don't have to be tricky with words; in spite of general human wisdom, a devil and a lawyer are not the same creature. What you mean, you know, and the moment I agree to the challenge, I will know it as exactly as you do. Or more so; humans lie to themselves in ways that devils cannot."

"The challenge?"

Aazian's eyes narrowed. "To me, Michael Brandt," he replied, relenting. "This *is* a challenge. It is a work of art, of planning, of understanding. I did not choose you because you would ask me for money, women, men, or fame."

"If I asked for world peace? A perfect place?"

Aazian snorted. "Do I look like God?" He smiled, and his grin was almost feral.

"I don't know. What does God look like?"

The humor fled Aazian's face in a moment. It was gone; there was a starkness and then a distance that he placed firmly between them. "Not even for your soul, little mortal, would I answer that question." Then he shook himself, as if remembering the game. But when he spoke, it was as if part of the heart had left him. "I cannot grant world peace unless the population of the world is willing to sell its collective soul to me. Which will not happen."

"I didn't think so, but I felt I had to ask."

"Conscience is such a petty thing."

"I imagine a lot people would agree with you." Michael fell silent for a moment, and then he began to walk again.

Aazian fell in step, smoothly and perfectly, blending the sound of their feet into one harmonic noise. "What do you

want, Michael Brandt? I sense this is all a game, and I bore easily."

"I imagine, at your age, you do." He shrugged. "But that's easy; at *my* age, I do. All right."

"Yes?"

"I want to be loved."

This was hardly a new request. Aazian could feel the disappointment like the taste of metal in his mouth. But he had chosen, and he had spent much time pondering; he had left little time for the work itself—the drawing of the contract. He had an artist's leeway, but he still had to answer to a higher authority. He held out his hand, palm up. Michael laid his hand, palm down, across the devil's. There was a momentary burst of pain; fire traveled up Michael's arm and lit past his shoulder into the core of his chest.

Before it was gone, before it had died, Michael Brandt took the last step and said two more words, each felt, each true. "By you."

Aazian froze in the Making, and the disappointment vanished; the heat of the words and the strangeness of the request burned it away like morning fog in the coming sun. He wanted to look at his hand, at his palm, but Michael's hand was tight and not easily evaded. "Clever," Aazian said at last.

"If you fail, I go where I go." Michael shrugged. "If you succeed, I go where you go." His expression was wistful apprehension; he looked much younger than his thirty-odd years.

"If I succeed," Aazian replied, "you go to Hell."

"If you succeed," Michael said, not to be frightened or put off, "why would I want heaven?"

Then, only then, did Aazian laugh bitterly. "Because," he replied, and he returned Michael's grip with a ferocity of his own, "only in Heaven can you gaze upon the face of God."

It was a clever bargain, really. Aazian wondered, in the darkness of Michael's sleep and the warmth of Michael's breath, if it was rather too clever for a devil of his distinction. Because he could see, clearly, how Michael hoped to gain eternity in the safety of hell. If Aazian succeeded.

And if he failed—he could allow for the possibility, given the unnatural request—then Michael's life would be, before that point, the pampered domain of a devil trying desperately to enshroud a soul.

He curled his fingers in Michael's hair; Michael stirred, whispered a word or two, and drifted away again. *There is a risk.* Like an edge, it glimmered in darkness, taunting Aazian with its unnatural complexity. *Risk.* But he did not clearly remember what the danger was when the dawn broke over the windowsill in a spill of colored light.

He knew, of course, the moment when the bargain was recorded. It did not happen immediately; there were other devils doing more primitive work, and they worked quickly. Of course, they tended to take those that would no doubt work their own way down to Hell, but that was all that was expected of them. Sloppy.

Aazian's Makings always required special attention, and each request was tended to by the Lord of Hell himself. So when Lucifer rose through the floors of Michael's three-bedroom apartment, Aazian was only mildly surprised. Michael was cooking—for some reason, Michael liked this sorry human preoccupation enough to refuse any aid—and the smell of eggs and bacon filled the air. On Sunday, eggs and bacon. During the week, oatmeal, bran or granola.

"Aazian."

Aazian bowed, as low as the floor would allow. "Lord."

"I have seen the Making, and I do not approve."

"Lord."

"Break it."

Aazian rose swiftly; were he human, his cheeks would have been flushed with the first hint of real anger beneath his fear. "Break it? When I have spent months following only this quarry and no others? Break it?"

"Even so." Lucifer's light was blinding. "You play a game that you do not understand, and I will not have it played. Break the Making; there is no risk to you."

Aazian bowed his head again, as if in defeat. And then he raised it, and his eyes were shining. "There is the loss of pride, Lord. And pride is greater in Hell than anything." It was a chancy thing to say; it could have gone either way.

"Is it?" The Lord of Hell said softly. Before Aazian could move, Lucifer's hand shot out; he gripped his servitor's throat between his perfect fingers. "Remember that pride is greater, Aazian, and perhaps I will let you continue."

Lucifer disappeared then, in a flash of light and beauty. But the marks on Aazian's throat remained there.

"Aazian? Were you talking to someone?"

"No one you know," Aazian said, turning away from the empty room.

He did not understand what love was. He could, of course, be sexual—that he understood well. He could manipulate, could emote in a certain way, could even react. But he knew, from his Making, that that was *not* what Michael Brandt would be content with. It was not romance he wanted, although he was a romantic. It was not sex, although he was sensual. It was not gestures, although the gestures gave him pleasure.

Michael tried to explain it, of course. He even seemed eager to do so—eager to lose his soul, lose what he was in eternity. But he could only tell Aazian what it wasn't; what it *was* was elusive.

Still, they talked. They always talked. Michael loved to talk. He also liked to listen, which Aazian found unusual in a human who possessed the right kinks to sell a soul. They

walked in the winter, and then they walked into the slush and mud of early spring. Michael worked; this Aazian had offered to make unnecessary, but Michael derived some sort of pleasure from the tedium of his daily existence.

After a while, Aazian understood this; he, too, took a certain pleasure and pride in his work—but at the beginning it was hard to understand.

Spring passed into summer and summer into autumn; the seasons turned in time the way the seasons do. Winter returned, and with it the chill of long evenings, the huddles of cold people seeking warmth. There was Christmas, but this indignity Aazian would not suffer.

“If Christmas is a time of love and giving,” he asked Michael, “why are there more suicides on Christmas Day than on any other?”

“You already understand it,” Michael said.

“Yes,” Aazian replied, his eyes on the darkness, on the people that walked to and fro beneath the uncurtained window. He turned to Michael, drew him into his arms. “But I wanted to know if you do. You do. And yet you play at it as if it were real.”

“Aazian,” Michael’s voice was edged. “I don’t care if you don’t come home with me. But I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Michael pulled away, angry. “Sometimes people need pretenses.”

“I know this, Michael. I see it everywhere. Over a pretense, many have given their souls.” He touched the back of Michael’s shoulder almost gently. “But not you. And if you don’t want pretense, why don’t you despise those who do?”

“No point,” Michael replied tersely. “Just drop it, okay?” He was tense, shaking. Then, slowly, his back smoothed and straightened, his breathing returned to normal. “Besides, you won’t win any brownie points by celebrating Christmas, will you?”

"Pretense costs me nothing," Aazian replied. "But if you wish, I'll wait for you here."

"Wait, then." But Michael turned to stare at him. "It's part of love sometimes, this pretense. We go home, it makes my parents happy. We pretend that we're glad to see each other, that everything's perfect for just the day."

"But you've lied to your parents."

"Have we? We've also given them something to treasure. Sometimes it's not the big sacrifices that defines love, it's the little ones."

"But if they love you, Michael, why would they want you to make those sacrifices?"

Michael shook his head. He walked out of the living room and came back wearing his coat. "Aazian, love is a human concept. Or at least my understanding of it is. Try to remember that."

"I do. Every day. Your concept of love is not mine."

Michael's eyes widened. "What is your concept of love?"

It was Aazian's turn to look away. "Go, Michael. Your family is waiting."

It was frustrating. Aazian struggled with it daily, this lack of understanding, this lack of *power*. Michael left him at the beginning of each day, and during the solitude and the quiet, Aazian would walk through the streets, sometimes choosing to be seen, sometimes to be invisible. He watched people feed birds, walk dogs, hold hands, and die along the concrete thoroughfares. He did not interfere.

But he looked at their souls as if they, prisms, were the only glimpse he was ever to have of the light. No, not the only glimpse. In Hell he had four near perfect gems, souls of very little darkness. He had taken them all, one by one, carefully preserving their color and their sheen. He had bound them with Makings and spells, teased them into his eternity. They were his art.

Yet none of them, so foreign to his own nature, perplexed him as Michael did. None of them—perhaps because of their milieu—had ever thought to ask of him what Michael asked. The near-impossible. What was this human love, this human sufferance? How was he to offer it fully if he couldn't understand it?

Yes, it frustrated Aazian.

It continued to frustrate him. Years turned in time; he could see their quiet march across Michael's face. He helped Michael as he could, listened to him, tried to teach him to look at the shadows in each man and woman, to use them to the best advantage. He held him, guarded him, existed at his whim. Five years. Ten.

And then, during the eleventh year, he began to feel restless and uncomfortable. The life he led, hidden and secret, was no longer enough for him. He didn't know why, nor could he trace the progress of this new irritability, although he tried for months to believe that it was only frustration and uncertainty. A Maker knows his contract has been fulfilled, and Michael still maintained a steady, safe distance.

Michael maintained a distance.

These four words marked a point of turning. Michael maintained his distance. But surely it wasn't Michael? For not in Michael's hands did the resolution of their bargain lay. It was *Aazian* who had to learn to love Michael. Human love. Human . . .

When Michael returned from work, Aazian was waiting for him. But he was not waiting as he usually did, and when Michael came through the door, he offered him no warmth, no greeting. Instead, he stood in the pooled shadow by the lamp that still remained off. The patina of mortal lover was gone; the devil remained, the demon. In the vague light there was a glint of feral teeth, a glitter of whiteless eye, that spoke of ancient anger.

"Aazian?" Michael's voice was soft. "Is there something wrong?"

"Only this," Aazian said, rising. "You do not love *me*." He could not keep the accusation out of his voice; he didn't try. But Michael was almost demonic in his unpredictability.

Instead of denying Aazian's words, instead of decrying them as no part of their bargain, he became still, tense; almost breathless. "No," he said at last.

"Michael, I have come to understand your desire in my Making. It's hard and I've learned much; I don't know if there's anything left for humanity to teach me. I will use this to my advantage when I have answered to my Lord." He did not move; his eyes, all black, were intent. "But this bargain of ours cannot be fulfilled by me alone. *That* is the part that I did not understand."

Michael's breath came out in a strange sigh, as if forced all at once from his body. "Is that what it was all about?" he asked. Aazian knew, by the queer distant look on his face, that the question was asked not of him, but of the past. "I thought it was because he didn't love me. Was it because I couldn't love him?"

"No," Aazian said, but quietly; the anger had fled as it often did in Michael's presence. "You couldn't love each other. Love is not something that can be done by one." He looked away, then, into the streets. Looked at the threaded ribbon of human souls as they walked, as they beckoned. "And I cannot continue."

"Can't?"

"Won't."

Michael swallowed. His lips trembled with words; Aazian feared they might remain unsaid. "No." His gaze hit the floor, as if weighted there, but he began to talk. "If I love you," his voice was a whisper, "I give you my soul. I don't own myself anymore."

"Yes," Aazian said. "That is the choice you make." He paused before continuing. "You love your parents, and they

own enough of you that you're willing to lie to them."

"I can't lie to you," Michael replied, although he still would not give Aazian a glimpse of his eyes. And then Michael laughed, almost wild, and looked up; his eyes were red. This was as close as he ever came to tears. "I told him that," he said, defiant. "That I wouldn't give him my soul. This is an irony that even he would have appreciated." He shook himself, shedding the stiffness, the unnatural containment, with which he had wrapped himself, and walked over to Aazian. "Don't give up yet. I'll try. All right?" He touched the contours of Aazian's face as if they were a foreign texture. "But I know as much about it as you do. Be patient?"

Aazian felt a curious tightness settle around him, a mixture of relief and of terror. Relief won; he drew Michael tightly into his arms. "I think," he said, against a curl of Michael's hair, "that you know less than I."

But Aazian met Michael's family, which was a matter of shock to both of his parents, of disgrace to his brother, and of relief to his sister. All this, when Michael never once mentioned his soul or the exact nature of his lover's foreign country. But Aazian understood the fear and prejudice well, and because it was almost familiar—a reminder of the void and the fires—he dwelt comfortably with it and did not fight it.

He met Michael's friends, and was surprised to find that they were few, if close. They accepted him with barely veiled curiosity, mild envy, and great happiness for Michael. This alloy of emotion was also comfortable.

And they survived Michael's fear—which was perhaps the hardest part of all.

The seasons turned in time, and when the last winter arrived Aazian knew it. It shadowed Michael's face with the cold of its long fingers. Aazian, of course, did not age—but he kept

up the appearance; for some reason, Michael preferred it. Michael was not very old, but the thing that killed him had no regard for age or love or dignity. Aazian had no further power over Michael's life, and had he the ability to make Michael healthy again, he wasn't certain what he would have done. He did not want Michael Brandt to die. But only upon Michael's death would the soul be his. And it *would* be his.

Aazian did not lie to Michael, and Michael did not ask it of him. They greeted death with the dignity that they could, and if Michael cried or raged or pleaded, it was a private matter, a momentary pain, that Aazian would never take advantage of. While Michael slept, Aazian watched him; when he woke, Aazian spoke with him. Toward the end, he did what he could to ease his pain and comfort him.

"I think," Michael whispered, late one night in the hospital ward, "you won. What will I look like in Hell?" He laughed, but his breath was a wheeze that ended with a shuddering cough.

"In Hell?" Aazian replied quietly. "No, Michael—I think you've won." He held Michael's hand between his own; both were cold. "I will not take you to Hell. You asked me what love meant to me, as a devil, and I would not answer you. Hush now, and let me tell you. Love is what we felt for God and the Heavens."

"Then why did you leave it?" Michael asked, blissfully unaware of the enormity of what had been said.

"Pride, Michael, and love for the Bright Lord, Lucifer." He lifted Michael's hand, curled his fingers up, and kissed them one by one. "But I love you enough to wish you to see what my love was once given to. Go where you will go." He rose.

"Where are you going?"

"To Hell, Michael. You will die soon—and I cannot be here to see it. My nature would not allow me to let you go."

Michael Brandt died five days later, in a stupor of pain and loneliness. He understood what Aazian had given him, but he took no comfort from it while alive. And dead?

Dead, with the gates of Heaven open and the light and brilliance washing a sky that no mortal eyes will ever see, he wept. He wandered along a path that held only the peaceful and beatific, and he took no comfort from them. At last, he met the keeper of the gates themselves, and the keeper took one look at him and drew back.

"You do not belong here," he said, his voice grave and final.

"No?" Michael asked. "How do I get where I belong?"

"Jump."

It was a funny thing to be told, but the word was a command of sorts, and Michael took to air and darkness as he leaped into the unknown. No; not the unknown. He was going home.

When he came at last to Hell, Aazian's name was on his lips. He saw the darkness, felt the fire, heard the sounds of pain that only a soul stripped of flesh can utter; he cried out Aazian's name that much louder. To be heard. To be felt.

On the plateau of a plane that made no sense, had no meaning, Aazian found his soul, his Michael. They had no words to offer, no questions to ask. Michael ran the last few feet to Aazian's embrace, and they clung together, a blotch on the landscape of Hell.

Prince of Flowers

Elizabeth Hand

Helen's first assignment on the inventory project was to the Department of Worms. For two weeks she paced the narrow alleys between immense tiers of glass cabinets, opening endless drawers of freeze-dried invertebrates and tagging each with an acquisition number. Occasionally she glimpsed other figures, drab as herself in government-issue smocks, gray shadows stalking through the murky corridors. They waved at her but seldom spoke, except to ask directions; everyone got lost in the museum.

Helen loved the hours lost in wandering the labyrinth of storage rooms, research labs, chilly vaults crammed with effigies of Yanomano Indians and stuffed jaguars. Soon she could identify each department by its smell: acrid dust from the feathered pelts in Ornithology; the cloying reek of fenugreek and syrup in Mammalogy's roach traps; fish and formaldehyde in Ichthyology. Her favorite was Paleontology, an annex where the air smelled damp and clean, as though beneath the marble floors trickled hidden water, undiscovered caves, mammoth bones to match those stored above. When her two weeks in Worms ended she was sent to Paleo, where she delighted in the skeletons strewn atop cabinets like forgotten toys, disembodied skulls glaring from behind wastebaskets and bookshelves. She found a *Fabrosaurus ischium* wrapped in brown paper and labeled in crayon; beside it a huge hand-hewn crate dated 1886 and marked *wyoming megosaur*. It had never been opened. Some mornings she sat with a small mound of fossils before her,

fitting the pieces together with the aid of a Victorian monograph. Hours passed in total silence, weeks when she saw only three or four people, curators slouching in and out of their research cubicles. On Fridays, when she dropped off her inventory sheets, they smiled. Occasionally even remembered her name. But mostly she was left alone, sorting cartons of bone and shale, prying apart frail skeletons of extinct fish as though they were stacks of newsprint.

Once, almost without thinking, she slipped a fossil fish into the pocket of her smock. The fossil was the length of her hand, as perfectly formed as a fresh beech leaf. All day she fingered it, tracing the imprint of bone and scale. In the bathroom later she wrapped it in paper towels and hid it in her purse to bring home. After that she started taking things.

At a downtown hobby shop she bought little brass and lucite stands to display them in her apartment. No one else ever saw them. She simply liked to look at them alone.

Her next transfer was to Mineralogy, where she counted misshapen meteorites and uncut gems. Gems bored her, although she took a chunk of petrified wood and a handful of unpolished amethysts and put them in her bathroom. A month later she was permanently assigned to Anthropology.

The Anthropology Department was in the most remote corner of the museum; its proximity to the boiler room made it warmer than the Natural Sciences wing, the air redolent of spice woods and exotic unguents used to polish arrowheads and ax-shafts. The ceiling reared so high overhead that the rickety lamps swayed slightly in draughts that Helen longed to feel. The constant subtle motion of the lamps sent flickering waves of light across the floor. Raised arms of Balinese statues seemed to undulate, and points of light winked behind the empty eyeholes of feathered masks.

Everywhere loomed shelves stacked with smooth ivory and gaudily beaded bracelets and neck-rings. Helen

crouched in corners loading her arms with bangles until her wrists ached from their weight. She unearthed dusty, lurid figures of temple demons and cleaned them, polished hollow cheeks and lapis eyes before stapling a number to each figure. A corner piled with tipi poles hid an abandoned desk that she claimed and decorated with mummy photographs and a ceramic coffee mug. In the top drawer she stored her cassette tapes and, beneath her handbag, a number of obsidian arrowheads. While it was never officially designated as her desk, she was annoyed one morning to find a young man tilted backward in the chair, shuffling through her tapes.

"Hello," he greeted her cheerfully. Helen winced and nodded coolly. "These your tapes? I'll borrow this one some day, haven't got the album yet. Leo Bryant—"

"Helen," she replied bluntly. "I think there's an empty desk down by the slit-gongs."

"Thanks, I just started. You a curator?"

Helen shook her head, rearranging the cassettes on the desk. "No. Inventory project." Pointedly she moved his knapsack to the floor.

"Me, too. Maybe we can work together sometime."

She glanced at his earnest face and smiled. "I like to work alone, thanks." He looked hurt, and she added, "Nothing personal—I just like it that way. I'm sure we'll run into each other. Nice to meet you, Leo." She grabbed a stack of inventory sheets and walked away down the corridor.

They met for coffee one morning. After a few weeks they met almost every morning, sometimes even for lunch outside on the Mall. During the day Leo wandered over from his cubicle in Ethnology to pass on departmental gossip. Sometimes they had a drink after work, but never often enough to invite gossip themselves. Helen was happy with this arrangement, the curators delighted to have such a worker as quiet, without ambition, punctual. Everyone except Leo left her to herself.

Late one afternoon Helen turned at the wrong corner and found herself in a small cul-de-sac between stacks of crates that cut off light and air. She yawned, breathing the faint must of cinnamon bark as she traced her path on a crumpled inventory map. This narrow alley was unmarked; the adjoining corridors contained Malaysian artifacts, batik tools, long teak boxes of gongs. Fallen crates, clumsily hewn cartons overflowing with straw were scattered on the floor. Splintered panels snagged her sleeves as she edged her way down the aisle. A sweet musk hung about these cartons, the languorous essence of unknown blossoms.

At the end of the cul-de-sac an entire row of crates had toppled, as though the weight of time had finally pitched them to the floor. Helen squatted and chose a box at random, a broad flat package like a portfolio. She pried the lid off to find a stack of leather cutouts curling with age, like desiccated cloth. She drew one carefully from the pile, frowning as its edges disintegrated at her touch. A shadow puppet, so fantastically elaborate that she couldn't tell if it was male or female; it scarcely looked human. Light glimmered through the grotesque latticework as Helen jerked it back and forth, its pale shadow dancing across the wall. Then the puppet split and crumbled into brittle curlicues that formed strange hieroglyphics on the black marble floor. Swearing softly, Helen replaced the lid, then jammed the box back into the shadows. Her fingers brushed another crate, of smooth polished mahogany. It had a comfortable heft as she pulled it into her lap. Each corner of the narrow lid was fixed with a large, square-headed nail. Helen yanked these out and set each upright in a row.

As she opened the box, dried flowers, seeds and wood shavings cascaded into her lap. She inhaled, closing her eyes, and imagined blue water and firelight, sweet-smelling seeds exploding in the embers. She sneezed and opened her eyes to a cloud of dust wafting from the crate like smoke. Very carefully she worked her fingers into the fragrant

excelsior, kneading the petals gently until she grasped something brittle and solid. She drew this out in a flurry of dead flowers.

It was a puppet: not a toy, but a gorgeously costumed figure, spindly arms clattering with glass and bone circlets, batik robes heavy with embroidery and beadwork. Long whittled pegs formed its torso and arms and the rods that swiveled it back and forth, so that its robes rippled tremulously, like a swallowtail's wings. Held at arm's length it gazed scornfully down at Helen, its face glinting with gilt paint. Sinuous vines twisted around each jointed arm. Flowers glowed within the rich threads of its robe, orchids blossoming in the folds of indigo cloth.

Loveliest of all was its face, the curve of cheeks and chin so gracefully arched it might have been cast in gold rather than coaxed from wood. Helen brushed it with a finger: the glossy white paint gleamed as though still wet. She touched the carmine bow that formed its mouth, traced the jet-black lashes stippled across its brow, like a regiment of ants. The smooth wood felt warm to her touch as she stroked it with her fingertips. A courtesan might have perfected its sphinx's smile; but in the tide of petals Helen discovered a slip of paper covered with spidery characters. Beneath the straggling script another hand had shaped clumsy block letters spelling out the name *prince of flowers*.

Once, perhaps, an imperial concubine had entertained herself with its fey posturing, and so passed the wet silences of a long green season. For the rest of the afternoon it was Helen's toy. She posed it and sent its robes dancing in the twilight room, the frail arms and tiny wrists twitching in a marionette's waltz.

Behind her a voice called, "Helen?"

"Leo," she murmured. "Look what I found."

He hunched beside her to peer at the figure. "Beautiful. Is that what you're on now? Balinese artifacts?"

She shrugged. "Is that what it is? I didn't know." She glanced down the dark rows of cabinets and sighed. "I probably shouldn't be here. It's just so hot—" She stretched and yawned as Leo slid the puppet from her hands.

"Can I see it?" He twisted it until its head spun and the stiff arms flittered. "Wild. Like one of those dancers in *The King and I*." He played with it absently, hypnotized by the swirling robes. When he stopped, the puppet jerked abruptly upright, its blank eyes staring at Helen.

"Be careful," she warned, kneading her smock between her thumbs. "It's got to be a hundred years old." She held out her hands and Leo returned it, bemused.

"It's wild, whatever it is." He stood and stretched. "I'm going to get a soda. Want to come?"

"I better get back to what I was working on. I'm supposed to finish the Burmese section this week." Casually she set the puppet in its box, brushed the dried flowers from her lap and stood.

"Sure you don't want a soda or something?" Leo hedged plaintively, snapping his ID badge against his chest. "You said you were hot."

"No thanks," Helen smiled wanly. "I'll take a raincheck. Tomorrow."

Peeved, Leo muttered and stalked off. When his silhouette faded away she turned and quickly pulled the box into a dim corner. There she emptied her handbag and arranged the puppet at its bottom, wrapping Kleenex about its arms and face. Hairbrush, wallet, lipstick: all thrown back into her purse, hiding the puppet beneath their clutter. She repacked the crate with its sad array of blossoms, hammering the lid back with her shoe. Then she scrabbled in the corner on her knees until she located a space between stacks of cartons. With a resounding crack the empty box struck the wall, and Helen grinned as she kicked more boxes to fill the gap. Years from now another inventory technician would discover it and

wonder, as she had countless times, what had once been inside the empty carton.

When she crowded into the elevator that afternoon the leather handle of her purse stuck to her palm like wet rope. She shifted the bag casually as more people stepped on at each floor, heart pounding as she called goodbye to the curator for Indo-Asian Studies passing in the lobby. Imaginary prison gates loomed and crumbled behind Helen as she strode through the columned doors and into the summer street.

All the way home she smiled triumphantly, clutching her handbag to her chest. As she fumbled at the front door for her keys a fresh burst of scent rose from the recesses of her purse. Inside, another scent overpowered this faint perfume, the thick reek of creosote, rotting fruit, unwashed clothes. Musty and hot and dark as the Museum's dreariest basement, the only two windows faced on to the street. Traffic ground past, piping bluish exhaust through the screens. A grimy mirror reflected shabby chairs, an end table with lopsided lamp: furniture filched from college dormitories or reclaimed from the corner dumpster. No paintings graced the pocked walls, blotched with the crushed remains of roaches and silverfish.

But beautiful things shone here, gleaming from windowsills and cracked Formica counters: the limp frond of a fossil fern, etched in obsidian glossy as wet tar; a whorled nautilus like a tiny whirlpool impaled upon a brass stand. In the centre of a splintered coffee table was the imprint of a foot-long dragonfly's wing embedded in limestone, its filigreed scales a shattered prism.

Corners heaped with lemur skulls and slabs of petrified wood. The exquisite cone shells of poisonous mollusks. Mounds of green and golden iridescent beetles, like the coinage of a distant country. Patches of linoleum scattered with shark's teeth and arrowheads; a tiny skull anchoring a handful of emerald plumes that waved in the breeze like a

sea-fan. Helen surveyed it all critically, noting with mild surprise a luminous pink geode; she'd forgotten that one.

Then she set to work. In a few minutes she'd removed everything from her bag and rolled the geode under a chair. She unwrapped the puppet on the table, peeling tissue from its brittle arms and finally twisting the long strand of white paper from its head, until she stood ankle-deep in a drift of tissue. The puppet's supporting rod slid neatly into the mouth of an empty beer bottle, and she arranged it so that the glass was hidden by its robes and the imperious face tilted upward, staring at the bug-flecked ceiling.

Helen squinted appraisingly, rearranged the feathers about the puppet, shoring them up with the carapaces of scarab beetles: still it looked all wrong. Beside the small proud figure, the fossils were muddy remains, the nautilus a bit of sea wrack. A breeze shifted the puppet's robes, knocking the scarabs to the floor, and before she knew it Helen had crushed them, the little emerald shells splintering to gray dust beneath her heel. She sighed in exasperation: all her pretty things suddenly looked so mean. She moved the puppet to the windowsill, to another table, and finally into her bedroom. No corner of the flat could hold it without seeming even grimmer than before. Helen swiped at cobwebs above the doorway before setting the puppet on her bedstand and collapsing with a sigh onto her mattress.

In the half-light of the windowless bedroom the figure was not so resplendent. Disappointed, Helen straightened its robes yet again. As she tugged the cloth into place, two violet petals, each the size of her pinky nail, slipped between her fingers. She rolled the tiny blossoms between her palms, surprised at how damp and fresh they felt, how they breathed a scent like ozone, or seawater. Thoughtfully she rubbed the violets until only a gritty pellet remained between her fingers.

Flowers, she thought, and recalled the name on the paper she'd found. The haughty figure wanted flowers.

Grabbing her key and a rusty pair of scissors, she ran outside. Thirty minutes later she returned, laden with blossoms: torn branches of crepe myrtle frothing pink and white, drooping tongues of honeysuckle, overblown white roses snipped from a neighbor's yard; chicory fading like a handful of blue stars. She dropped them all at the foot of the bed and then searched the kitchen until she found a dusty wine carafe and some empty jars. Once these were rinsed and filled with water she made a number of unruly bouquets, then placed them all around the puppet, so that its pale head nodded amid a cloud of white and mauve and frail green.

Helen slumped back on the bed, grinning with approval. Bottles trapped the wavering pools of light and cast shimmering reflections across the walls. The crepe myrtle sent the palest mauve cloud onto the ceiling, blurring the jungle shadows of the honeysuckle.

Helen's head blurred, as well. She yawned, drowsy from the thick scents of roses, cloying honeysuckle, all the languor of summer nodding in an afternoon. She fell quickly asleep, lulled by the breeze in the stolen garden and the dozy burr of a lost bumblebee.

Once, her sleep broke. A breath of motion against her shoulder—mosquito? spider? centipede?—then a tiny lancing pain, the touch of invisible legs or wings, and it was gone. Helen grimaced, scratched, staggered up and into the bathroom. Her bleary reflection showed a swollen bite on her shoulder. It tingled, and a drop of blood pearled at her touch. She put on a nightshirt, checked her bed for spiders, then tumbled back to sleep.

Much later she woke to a sound: once, twice, like the resonant *plank* of a stone tossed into a well. Then a slow melancholy note: another well, a larger stone striking its dark surface. Helen moaned, turning onto her side. Fainter echoes joined these first sounds, plangent tones sweet as rain in the mouth. Her ears rang with this steady pulse, until

suddenly she clenched her hands and stiffened, concentrating on the noise.

From wall to ceiling to floor the thrumming echo bounced; grew louder, diminished, droned to a whisper. It did not stop. Helen sat up, bracing herself against the wall, the last shards of sleep fallen from her. Her hand slipped and very slowly she drew it toward her face. It was wet. Between her fingers glistened a web of water, looping like silver twine down her wrist until it was lost in the blue-veined valley of her elbow. Helen shook her head in disbelief and stared up at the ceiling. From one end of the room to the other stretched a filament of water, like a hairline fracture. As she watched, the filament snapped and a single warm drop splashed her temple. Helen swore and slid to the edge of the mattress, then stopped.

At first she thought the vases had fallen to the floor, strewing flowers everywhere. But the bottles remained on the bedstand, their blossoms casting ragged silhouettes in the dark. More flowers were scattered about the bottles: violets, crimson roses, a tendril rampant with tiny fluted petals. Flowers cascaded to the floor, nestled amid folds of dirty clothes. Helen plucked an orchid from the linoleum, blinking in amazement. Like a wavering pink flame it glowed, the feathery pistils staining her fingertips bright yellow. Absently Helen brushed the pollen on to her thigh, scraping her leg with a hangnail.

That small pain jarred her awake. She dropped the orchid. For the first time it didn't feel like a dream. The room was hot, humid as though moist towels pressed against her face. As she stared at her thigh the bright fingerprint, yellow as a crocus, melted and dissolved as sweat broke on her skin. She stepped forward, the orchid bursting beneath her heel like a ripe grape. A sickly smell rose from the broken flower. Each breath she took was heavy, as with rain, and she choked. The rims of her nostrils were wet. She sneezed, inhaling warm water. Water streamed down her cheeks and

she drew her hand slowly upward, to brush the water from her eyes. She could move it no further than her lap. She looked down, silently mouthing bewilderment as she shook her head.

Another hand grasped her wrist, a hand delicate and limp as a cut iris wand, so small that she scarcely felt its touch upon her pulse. Inside her skull the blood thrummed counterpoint to the *gamelan*, gongs echoing the throb and beat of her heart. The little hand disappeared. Helen staggered backward onto the bed, frantically scrambling for the light switch. In the darkness, something crept across the rippling bedsheets.

When she screamed her mouth was stuffed with roses, orchids, the corner of her pillowcase. Tiny hands pinched her nostrils shut and forced more flowers between her lips until she lay still, gagging on aromatic petals. From the rumpled bedclothes reared a shadow, child-size, grinning. Livid shoots of green and yellow encircled its spindly arms and the sheets whispered like rain as it crawled toward her. Like a great mantis it dragged itself forward on its long arms, the rough cloth of its robe catching between her knees, its white teeth glittering. She clawed through the sheets, trying to dash it against the wall. But she could not move. Flowers spilled from her mouth when she tried to scream, soft fingers of orchids sliding down her throat as she flailed at the bedclothes.

And the clanging of the gongs did not cease: not when the tiny hands pattered over her breasts; not when the tiny mouth hissed in her ear. Needle teeth pierced her shoulder as a long tongue unfurled and lapped there, flicking blood on to the blossoms wreathed about her neck. Only when the slender shadow withdrew and the terrible, terrible dreams began did the *gamelans* grow silent.

Nine thirty came, long after Helen usually met Leo in the cafeteria. He waited, drinking an entire pot of coffee before

he gave up and wandered downstairs, piqued that she hadn't shown up for breakfast.

In the same narrow hallway behind the Malaysian artifacts he discovered her, crouched over a pair of tapered wooden crates. For a long moment he watched her, and almost turned back without saying anything. Her hair was dirty, twisted into a sloppy bun, and the hunch of her shoulders hinted at exhaustion. But before he could leave, she turned to face him, clutching the boxes to her chest.

"Rough night?" croaked Leo. A scarf tied around her neck didn't hide the bruises there. Her mouth was swollen, her eyes soft and shadowed with sleeplessness. He knew she must see people, men, boyfriends. But she had never mentioned anyone, never spoke of weekend trips or vacations. Suddenly he felt betrayed, and spun away to leave.

"Leo," murmured Helen, absently stroking the crate. "I can't talk right now. I got in so late. I'm kind of busy."

"I guess so." He laughed uncertainly, but stopped before turning the corner to see her pry open the lid of the box, head bent so that he could not tell what it was she found inside.

A week passed. Leo refused to call her. He timed his forays to the cafeteria to avoid meeting her there. He left work late so he wouldn't see her in the elevator. Every day he expected to see her at his desk, find a telephone message scrawled on his memo pad. But she never appeared.

Another week went by. Leo ran into the curator for Indo-Asian Studies by the elevator.

"Have you seen Helen this week?" she asked, and Leo actually blushed at mention of her name.

"No," he mumbled. "Not for a while, really."

"Guess she's sick." The curator shrugged and stepped onto the elevator. Leo rode all the way down to the basement and roamed the corridors for an hour, dropping by

the Anthropology office. No Helen, no messages from her at the desk.

He wandered back down the hall, pausing in the corridor where he had last seen her. A row of boxes had collapsed and he kicked at the cartons, idly knelt and read the names on the packing crates as if they held a clue to Helen's sudden change. Labels in Sanskrit, Vietnamese, Chinese, English, crumbling beside baggage labels and exotic postage stamps and scrawled descriptions of contents. *wajang goleh*, he read. Beneath was scribbled *puppets*. He squatted on the floor, staring at the bank of crates, then half-heartedly started to read each label. Maybe she'd find him there. Perhaps she'd been sick, had a doctor's appointment. She might be late again.

A long box rattled when he shifted it. *kris*, read the label, and he peeked inside to find an ornate sword. A heavier box bore the legend *sanghyang: spirit puppet*. And another that seemed to be empty, embellished with a flowing script: *sekar mas*, and the clumsy translation *prince of flowers*.

He slammed the last box against the wall and heard the dull creak of splintering wood. She would not be in today. She hadn't been in for two weeks. That night he called her.

"Hello?"

Helen's voice; at least a man hadn't answered.

"Helen. How you doing? It's Leo."

"Leo." She coughed and he heard someone in the background. "It's you."

"Right," he said dryly, then waited for an apology, her embarrassed laugh, another cough that would be followed by an invented catalogue of hay fever, colds, flu. But she said nothing. He listened carefully and realized it wasn't a voice he had heard in the background but a constant stir of sound, like a fan, or running water. "Helen? You okay?"

A long pause. "Sure. Sure I'm okay." Her voice faded and he heard a high, piping note.

"You got a bird, Helen?"

“What?”

He shifted the phone to his other ear, shoving it closer to his head so he could hear better. “A bird. There’s this funny voice, it sounds like you got a bird or something.”

“No,” replied Helen slowly. “I don’t have a bird. There’s nothing wrong with my phone.” He could hear her moving around her apartment, the background noises rising and falling but never silent. “Leo, I can’t talk now. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Tomorrow?” he exploded. “I haven’t seen you in two weeks!”

She coughed and said, “Well, I’m sorry. I’ve been busy. I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye.”

He started to argue, but the phone was already dead.

She didn’t come in the next day. At three o’clock he went to the Anthropology Department and asked the secretary if Helen had been in that morning.

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “And they’ve got her down as AWOL. She hasn’t been in all week.” She hesitated before whispering. “Leo, she hasn’t looked very good lately. You think maybe . . .” Her voice died and she shrugged, “Who knows,” and turned to answer the phone.

He left work early, walking his bicycle up the garage ramp and wheeling it to the right, toward Helen’s neighborhood. He was fuming, but a sliver of fear had worked its way through his anger. He had almost gone to her supervisor; almost phoned Helen first. Instead, he pedaled quickly down Pennsylvania Avenue, skirting the first lanes of rush-hour traffic. Union Station loomed a few blocks ahead. He recalled an article in yesterday’s *Post*: vandals had destroyed the rose garden in front of the station. He detoured through the bus lane that circled the building and skimmed around the desecrated garden, shaking his head and staring back in dismay. All the roses: gone. Someone had lopped each bloom from its stem. In spots the cobblestones were littered with mounds of blossoms, brown with decay. Here and there

dead flowers still dangled from hacked stems. Swearing in disgust, Leo made a final loop, nearly skidding into a bus as he looked back at the plundered garden. Then he headed toward Helen's apartment building a few blocks north.

Her windows were dark. Even from the street the curtains looked filthy, as though dirt and exhaust had matted them to the glass. Leo stood on the curb and stared at the blank eyes of each apartment window gaping in the stark concrete façade.

Who would want to live here? he thought, ashamed. He should have come sooner. Shame froze into apprehension and the faintest icy sheath of fear. Hurriedly he locked his bike to a parking meter and approached her window, standing on tiptoe to peer inside. Nothing. The discolored curtains hid the rooms from him like clouds of ivory smoke. He tapped once, tentatively; then, emboldened by silence, rapped for several minutes, squinting to see any movement inside.

Still nothing. Leo swore out loud and slung his hands into his pockets, wondering lamely what to do. Call the police? Next of kin? He winced at the thought: as if she couldn't do that herself. Helen had always made it clear that she enjoyed being on her own. But the broken glass beneath his sneakers, windblown newspapers tugging at the bottom steps; the whole unkempt neighborhood denied that. Why here? he thought angrily; and then he was taking the steps two at a time, kicking bottles and burger wrappers out of his path.

He waited by the door for five minutes before a teenage boy ran out. Leo barely caught the door before it slammed behind him. Inside, a fluorescent light hung askew from the ceiling, buzzing like a wasp. Helen's was the first door to the right. Circulars from convenience stores drifted on the floor, and on the far wall was a bank of mailboxes. One was ajar, stuffed with unclaimed bills and magazines. More envelopes piled on the steps. Each bore Helen's name.

His knocking went unanswered; but he thought he heard someone moving inside. "Helen," he called softly. "It's Leo. You okay?"

He knocked harder, called her name, finally pounded with both fists. Still nothing. He should leave; he should call the police. Better still, forget ever coming here. But he was here, now; the police would question him no matter what; the curator for Indo-Asian Studies would look at him askance. Leo bit his lip and tested the doorknob. Locked; but the wood gave way slightly as he leaned against it. He rattled the knob and braced himself to kick the door in.

He didn't have to. In his hand the knob twisted and the door swung inward, so abruptly that he fell inside. The door banged shut behind him. He glanced across the room, looking for her; but all he saw was gray light, the gauzy shadows cast by gritty curtains. Then he breathed in, gagging, and pulled his sleeve to his mouth until he gasped through the cotton. He backed toward the door, slipping on something dank, like piles of wet clothing. He glanced at his feet and grunted in disgust.

Roses. They were everywhere: heaps of rotting flowers, broken branches, leaves stripped from bushes, an entire small ficus tree tossed into the corner. He forgot Helen, turned to grab the doorknob and tripped on an uprooted azalea. He fell, clawing at the wall to balance himself. His palms splayed against the plaster and slid as though the surface was still wet. Then, staring upward he saw that it *was* wet. Water streamed from the ceiling, flowing down the wall to soak his shirt cuffs. Leo moaned. His knees buckled as he sank, arms flailing, into the mass of decaying blossoms. Their stench suffocated him; his eyes watered as he retched and tried to stagger back to his feet.

Then he heard something, like a bell, or a telephone; then another faint sound, like an animal scratching overhead. Carefully he twisted to stare upward, trying not to betray himself by moving too fast. Something skittered across the

ceiling, and Leo's stomach turned dizzily. What could be up there? A second blur dashed to join the first; golden eyes stared down at him, unblinking.

Geckos, he thought frantically. She had pet geckos. She *has* pet geckos. Jesus.

She couldn't be here. It was too hot, the stench horrible: putrid water, decaying plants, water everywhere. His trousers were soaked from where he had fallen, his knees ached from kneeling in a trough of water pooling against the wall. The floor had warped and more flowers protruded from cracks between the linoleum, brown fronds of iris and rotting honeysuckle. From another room trickled the sound of water dripping steadily, as though a tap was running.

He had to get out. He'd leave the door open—police, a landlord. Someone would call for help. But he couldn't reach the door. He couldn't stand. His feet skated across the slick tiles as his hands tore uselessly through wads of petals. It grew darker. Golden bands rippled across the floor as sunlight filtered through the gray curtains. Leo dragged himself through rotting leaves, his clothes sopping, tugging aside mats of greenery and broken branches. His leg ached where he'd fallen on it and his hands stung, pricked by unseen thorns.

Something brushed against his fingers and he forced himself to look down, shuddering. A shattered nautilus left a thin red line across his hand, the sharp fragments gilded by the dying light. As he looked around he noticed other things, myriad small objects caught in the morass of rotting flowers like a nightmarish ebb tide on the linoleum floor. Agates and feathered masks; bird of paradise plumes encrusted with mud; cracked skulls and bones and cloth of gold. He recognized the carved puppet Helen had been playing with that afternoon in the Indonesian corridor, its headdress glittering in the twilight. About its neck was strung a plait of flowers, amber and cerulean blossoms glowing like phosphorescence among the ruins.

Through the room echoed a dull clang. Leo jerked to his knees, relieved. Surely someone had knocked? But the sound came from somewhere behind him, and was echoed in another, harsher, note. As this second bell died he heard the geckos' feet pattering as they fled across the ceiling. A louder note rang out, the windowpanes vibrating to the sound as though wind-battered. In the corner the leaves of the ficus turned as if to welcome rain, and the rosebushes stirred.

Leo heard something else, then: a small sound like a cat stretching to wakefulness. Now both of his legs ached, and he had to pull himself forward on his hands and elbows, striving to reach the front door. The clanging grew louder, more resonant. A higher tone echoed it monotonously, like the echo of rain in a well. Leo glanced over his shoulder to the empty doorway that led to the kitchen, the dark mouth of the hallway to Helen's bedroom. Something moved there.

At his elbow moved something else and he struck at it feebly, knocking the puppet across the floor. Uncomprehending, he stared after it, then cowered as he watched the ceiling, wondering if one of the geckos had crept down beside him.

There was no gecko. When Leo glanced back at the puppet it was moving across the floor toward him, pulling itself forward on its long slender arms.

The gongs thundered now. A shape humped across the room, something large enough to blot out the empty doorway behind it. Before he was blinded by petals, Leo saw that it was a shrunken figure, a woman whose elongated arms clutched broken branches to propel herself, legs dragging uselessly through the tangled leaves. About her swayed a host of brilliant figures no bigger than dolls. They had roped her neck and hands with wreaths of flowers and scattered blossoms on to the floor about them. Like a flock of chattering butterflies they surged toward him, tiny hands outstretched, their long tongues unfurling like crimson

pistils, and the gongs rang like golden bells as they gathered about him to feed.

It Was the Heat

Pat Cadigan

It was the heat, the incredible heat that never lets up, never eases, never once gives you a break. Sweat till you die; bake till you drop; fry, broil, burn, baby, burn. How'd you like to live in a fever and never feel cool, never, never, never.

Women think they want men like that. They think they want someone to put the devil in their Miss Jones. Some of them even lie awake at night, alone, or next to a silent lump of husband or boyfriend or friendly stranger, thinking, *Let me be completely consumed with fire. In the name of love.*

Sure.

Right feeling, wrong name. Try again. And the thing is, they do. They try and try and try, and if they're very, very unlucky, they find one of them.

I thought I had him right where I wanted him—between my legs. Listen, I didn't always talk this way. That wasn't me you saw storming the battlements during the Sexual Revolution. My ambition was liberated but I didn't lose my head, or give it. It wasn't me saying, *Let them eat pie*. Once I had a sense of propriety but I lost it with my inhibitions.

You think these things happen only in soap operas—the respectable, thirty-five-year-old wife and working mother goes away on a business trip with a suitcase full of navy-blue suits and class blouses with the bow at the neck and a briefcase crammed with paperwork. Product management is not a pretty sight. Sensible black pumps are a must for the run on the fast track and if your ambition is sufficiently

liberated, black pumps can keep pace with perforated wing-tips, even outrun them.

But men know the secret. Especially businessmen. This is why management conferences are sometimes held in a place like New Orleans instead of the professional canyons of New York City or Chicago. Men know the secret and now I do, too. But I didn't then, when I arrived in New Orleans with my luggage and my paperwork and my inhibitions, to be installed in the Bourbon Orleans Hotel in the French Quarter.

The room had all the charm of home—more, since I wouldn't be cleaning it up. I hung the suits in the bathroom, ran the shower, called home, already feeling guilty. Yes, boys, Mommy's at the hotel now and she has a long meeting to go to, let me talk to Daddy. Yes, dear, I'm fine. It was a long ride from the airport, good thing the corporation's paying for this, too. Yes, there's a pool but I doubt I'll have time to use it and anyway, I didn't bring a suit. Not that kind of suit. This isn't a pleasure trip, you know, I'm not on vacation. No. Yes. No. Kiss the boys for me. I love you, too.

If you want to be as conspicuous as possible, be a woman walking almost late into a meeting room full of men who are all gunning to be CEOs. Pick out the two or three other female faces and nod to them even though they're complete strangers, and find a seat near them. Listen to the man at the front of the room say, *Now that we're all here, we can begin*, and know that every man is thinking that means you. Imagine what they are thinking, imagine what they are whispering to each other. Imagine that they know you can't concentrate on the opening presentation because your mind is on your husband and children back home instead of the business at hand when the real reason you can't concentrate is because you're imagining they must all be thinking your mind is on your husband and children back home instead of the business at hand.

Do you know what *they're* thinking about, really? They're thinking about the French Quarter. Those who have been

there before are thinking about jazz and booze in go-cups and bars where the women are totally nude, totally, and those who haven't been there before are wondering if everything's as wild as they say.

Finally the presentation ended and the discussion period following the presentation ended (the women had nothing to discuss so as not to be perceived as the ones delaying the afterhours jaunt into the French Quarter). Tomorrow, nine o'clock in the Hyatt, second floor meeting room. Don't let's be too hung over to make it boys, ha, ha. Oh, and girls, too, of course, ha, ha.

The things you hear when you don't have a crossbow.

Demure, I took a cab back to the Bourbon Orleans, intending to leave a wake-up call for six thirty, ignoring the streets already filling up. In early May, with Mardi Gras already a dim memory? Was there a big convention in town this week, I asked the cab driver.

No, ma'am, he told me (his accent—Creole or Cajun? I don't know—made it more like *ma'ahm*). De Quarter always be jumpin', and de weather be so lovely.

This was lovely? I was soaked through my drip-dry white blouse and the suit coat would start to smell if I didn't take it off soon. My crisp, boardroom coiffure had gone limp and trickles of sweat were tracking leisurely along my scalp. Product management was meant to live in air conditioning (we call it climate control, as though we really could, but there is no controlling this climate).

At the last corner before the hotel, I saw him standing at the curb. Tight jeans, red shirt knotted above the navel to show off the washboard stomach. Definitely not executive material; executives are required to be doughy in that area and the area to the south of that was never delineated quite so definitely as it was in this man's jeans.

Some sixth sense made him bend to see who was watching him from the back seat of the cab.

“Mamma, mamma!” he called and kissed the air between us. “You wanna go to a party?” He came over to the cab and motioned for me to roll the window all the way down. I slammed the lock down on the door and sat back, clutching my sensible black purse.

“C’mon, mamma!” He poked his fingers through the small opening of the window. “I be good to you!” The golden hair was honey from peroxide but the voice was honey from the comb. The light changed and he snatched his fingers away just in time.

“I’ll be waiting!” he shouted after me. I didn’t look back.

“What was all that about?” I asked the cab driver.

“Just a wild boy. Lotta wild boys in the Quarter, ma’am.” We pulled up next to the hotel and he smiled over his shoulder at me, his teeth just a few shades lighter than his coffee-colored skin. “Any time you want to find a wild boy for yourself, this is where you look.” It came out more like *dis is wheah you look*. “You got a nice company sends you to the Quarter for doin’ business.”

I smiled back, overtipped him, and escaped into the hotel.

It wasn’t even a consideration, that first night. Wake-up call for six-thirty, just as I’d intended, to leave time for showering and breakfast, like the good wife and mother and executive I’d always been.

Beignets for breakfast. Carl had told me I must have beignets for breakfast if I were going to be in New Orleans. He’d bought some beignet mix and tried to make some for me the week before I’d left. They’d come out too thick and heavy and only the kids had been able to eat them, liberally dusted with powdered sugar. If I found a good place for beignets, I would try to bring some home, I’d decided, for my lovely, tolerant, patient husband, who was now probably making thick, heavy pancakes for the boys. Nice of him to sacrifice some of his vacation time to be home with the boys while Mommy was out of town. Mommy had never gone out

of town on business before. Daddy had, of course; several times. At those times, Mommy had never been able to take any time away from the office, though, so she could be with the boys while Daddy was out of town. Too much work to do; if you want to keep those sensible black pumps on the fast track, you can't be putting your family before the work. Lots of women lose out that way, you know, Martha?

I knew.

No familiar faces in the restaurant, but I wasn't looking for any. I moved my tray along the line, took a beignet and poured myself some of the famous Louisiana chicory coffee before I found a small table under a ceiling fan. No air-conditioning and it was already up in the eighties. I made a concession and took off my jacket. After another bite of the beignet, I made another and unbuttoned the top two buttons of my blouse. The pantyhose already felt sticky and uncomfortable. I had a perverse urge to slip off to the ladies' room and take them off. Would anyone notice or care? That would leave me with nothing under the half-slip. Would anyone guess? There goes a lady executive with no pants on. In the heat, it was not unthinkable. No underwear at all was not unthinkable. Everything was binding. A woman in a gauzy caftan breezed past my table, glancing down at me with careless interest. Another out-of-towner, yes. You can tell—we're the only ones not dressed for the weather.

"All right to sit here, ma'am?"

I looked up. He was holding a tray with one hand, already straddling the chair across from me, only waiting my permission to sink down and join me. Dark, curly hair, just a bit too long, darker eyes, smooth skin the color of over-creamed coffee. Tank top over jeans. He eased himself down and smiled. I must have said yes.

"All the other tables're occupied or ain't been bussed, ma'am. Hope you don't mind, you a stranger here and all." The smile was as slow and honeyed as the voice. They all

talked in honey tones here. "Eatin' you one of our nice beignets, I see. First breakfast in the Quarter, am I right?"

I used a knife and fork on the beignet. "I'm here on business."

"You have a very striking face."

I risked a glance up at him. "You're very kind." Thirty-five and up is striking, if the world is feeling kind.

"When your business is done, shall I see you in the Quarter?"

"I doubt it. My days are very long." I finished the beignet quickly, gulped the coffee. He caught my arm as I got up. It was a jolt of heat, like being touched with an electric wand.

"I have a husband and three children!" It was the only thing I could think to say.

"You don't want to forget your jacket."

It hung limply on the back of my chair. I wanted to forget it badly, to have an excuse to go through the day of meetings and seminars in shirtsleeves. I put the tray down and slipped the jacket on. "Thank you."

"Name is Andre, ma'am." The dark eyes twinkled. "My heart will surely break if I don't see you tonight in the Quarter."

"Don't be silly."

"It's too hot to be silly, ma'am."

"Yes. It is," I said stiffly. I looked for a place to take the tray.

"They take it away for you. You can just leave it here. Or you can stay and have another cup of coffee and talk to a lonely soul." One finger plucked at the low scoop of the tank top. "I'd like that."

"A cab driver warned me about wild boys," I said, holding my purse carefully to my side.

"I doubt it. He may have told you but he didn't warn you. And I ain't a boy, ma'am."

Sweat gathered in the hollow between my collarbones and spilled downward. He seemed to be watching the trickle

disappear down into my blouse. Under the aroma of baking breads and pastries and coffee, I caught a scent of something else.

“Boys stand around on street corners, they shout rude remarks, they don’t know what a woman is.”

“That’s enough,” I snapped. “I don’t know why you picked me out for your morning’s amusement. Maybe because I’m from out of town? You wild boys get a kick out of annoying the tourists, is that it? If I see you again, I’ll call a cop.” I stalked out and pushed myself through the humidity to hail a cab. By the time I reached the Hyatt, I might as well not have showered.

“I’m skipping out on this afternoon’s session,” the woman whispered to me. Her badge said she was Frieda Fellowes, of Boston, Massachusetts. “I heard the speaker last year. He’s the biggest bore in the world. I’m going shopping. Care to join me?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I have to write up a report on this when I get home and I’d better be able to describe everything in detail.”

She looked at my badge. “You must work for a bunch of real hardasses up in Schenectady.” She leaned forward to whisper to the other woman sitting in the row ahead of us, who nodded eagerly.

They were both missing from the afternoon session. The speaker was the biggest bore in the world. The men had all conceded to shirtsleeves. Climate control failed halfway through the seminar and it broke up early, releasing us from the stuffiness of the meeting room into the thick air of the city. I stopped in the lobby bathroom and took off my pantyhose, rolled them into an untidy ball and stuffed them in my purse before getting a cab back to my own hotel.

One of the men from my firm phoned my room and invited me to join him and the guys for drinks and dinner. We met in

a crowded little place called Messina's, four male executives and me. It wasn't until I excused myself and went to the closet-sized bathroom that I realized I'd put my light summer slacks on over nothing. A careless mistake, akin to starting off to the supermarket on a Saturday morning in my bedroom slippers. Mommy's got a lot on her mind. Martha, the No-Pants Executive. Guess what, dear, I went out to dinner in New Orleans with four men and forgot to wear panties. Well, women do reach their sexual peak at thirty-five, don't they, honey?

The heat was making me crazy. No air-conditioning here, either, just fans, pushing the damp air around.

I rushed through the dinner of red beans and rice and hot sausage; someone ordered a round of beers and I gulped mine down to cool the sausage. No one spoke much. Martha's here, better keep it low-key, guys. I decided to do them a favor and disappear after the meal. There wouldn't be much chance of running into me at any of the nude bars, nothing to be embarrassed about. Thanks for tolerating my presence, fellas.

But they looked a little puzzled when I begged off anything further. The voice blew over to me as I reached the door, carried on a wave of humidity pushed by one of the fans: "Maybe she's got a headache tonight." General laughter.

Maybe all four of you together would be a disappointment, boys. Maybe none of you know what a woman is.

They didn't look especially wild, either.

I had a drink by the pool instead of going right up to the hotel room. Carl would be coping with supper and homework and whatnot. Better to call later, after they were all settled down.

I finished the drink and ordered another. It came in a plastic cup, with apologies from the waiter. "Temporarily

short on crystal tonight, ma'am. Caterin' a private dinner here. Hope you don't mind a go-cup this time."

"A what?"

The man's smile was bright. "Go-cup. You take it and walk around with it."

"That's allowed?"

"All over the Quarter, ma'am." He moved on to another table.

So I walked through the lobby with it and out into the street, and no one stopped me.

Just down at the corner, barely half a block away, the streets were filling up again. Many of the streets seemed to be pedestrians only. I waded in, holding the go-cup. Just to look around. I couldn't really come here and not look around.

"It's supposed to be a whorehouse where the girls swung naked on velvet swings."

I turned away from the high window where the mannequin legs had been swinging in and out to look at the man who had spoken to me. He was a head taller than I was, long-haired, attractive in a rough way.

"Swung? I said. "You mean they don't any more?"

He smiled and took my elbow, positioning me in front of an open doorway, pointed in. I looked; a woman was lying naked on her stomach under a mirror suspended overhead. Perspiration gleamed on her skin.

"Buffet?" I said. "All you can eat, a hundred dollars?"

The man threw back his head and laughed heartily. "New in the Quarter, aintcha?" Same honey in the voice. They caress you with their voices here, I thought, holding the crumpled go-cup tightly. It was a different one; I'd had another drink since I'd come out and it hadn't seemed like a bad idea at all, another drink, the walking around, all of it. Not by myself, anyway.

Something brushed my hip. "You'll let me buy you another, wontcha?" Dark hair, dark eyes; young. I

remembered that for a long time.

Wild creatures in lurid long dresses catcalled screechily from a second-floor balcony as we passed below on the street. My eyes were heavy with heat and alcohol but I kept walking. It was easy with him beside me, his arm around me and his hand resting on my hip.

Somewhere along the way, the streets grew much darker and the crowds disappeared. A few shadows in the larger darkness; I saw them leaning against street signs; we passed one close enough to smell a mixture of perfume and sweat and alcohol and something else.

"Didn't nobody never tell you to come out alone at night in this part of the Quarter?" The question was amused, not reproving. They caress you with their voices down here, with their voices and the darkness and the heat, which gets higher as it gets darker. And when it gets hot enough, they melt and flow together and run all over you, more fluid than water.

What are you doing?

I'm walking into a dark hallway; I don't know my footing, I'm glad there's someone with me.

What are you doing?

I'm walking into a dark room to get out of the heat, but it's no cooler here and I don't really care after all.

What are you doing?

I'm overdressed for the season here; this isn't Schenectady in the spring, it's New Orleans, it's the French Quarter.

What are you doing?

I'm hitting my sexual peak at thirty-five.

"What are you doing?"

Soft laughter. "Oh, honey, don't you know?"

The Quarter was empty at dawn, maybe because it was raining. I found my way back to the Bourbon Orleans in the

downpour anyway. It shut off as suddenly as a suburban lawn sprinkler just as I reached the front door of the hotel.

I fell into bed and slept the day away, no wake-up calls, and when I opened my eyes, the sun was going down and I remembered how to find him.

You'd think there would have been a better reason: my husband ignored me or my kids were monsters or my job was a dead-end or some variation on the mid-life crisis. It wasn't any of those things. Well, the seminars *were* boring but nobody gets that bored. Or maybe they did and I'd just never heard about it.

It was the heat.

The heat gets inside you. Then you get a fever from the heat, and from fever you progress to delirium and from delirium into another state of being. Nothing is real in delirium. No, scratch that: everything is real in a different way. In delirium, everything floats, including time. Lighter than air, you slip away. Day breaks apart from night, leaves you with scraps of daylight. It's all right—when it gets that hot, it's too hot to see, too hot to bother looking. I remembered dark hair, dark eyes, but it was all dark now and in the dark, it was even hotter than in the daylight.

It was the heat. It never let up. It was the heat and the smell. I'll never be able to describe that smell except to say that if it were a sound, it would have been round and mellow and sweet, just the way it tasted. As if he had no salt in his body at all. As if he had been distilled from the heat itself, and salt had just been left behind in the process.

It was the heat.

And then it started to get cool.

It started to cool down to the eighties during the last two days of the conference and I couldn't find him. I made a half-hearted showing at one of the seminars after a two-day

absence. They stared, all the men and the women, especially the one who had asked me to go shopping.

"I thought you'd been kidnapped by white slavers," she said to me during the break. "What happened? You don't look like you feel so hot."

"I feel very hot," I said, helping myself to the watery lemonade punch the hotel laid out on a table. With beignets. The sight of them turned my stomach and so did the punch. I put it down again. "I've been running a fever."

She touched my face, frowning slightly. "You don't feel feverish. In fact, you feel pretty cool. Clammy, even."

"It's the air-conditioning," I said, drawing back. Her fingers were cold, too cold to tolerate. "The heat and the air-conditioning. It's fucked me up."

Her eyes widened.

"*Messed* me up, excuse me. I've been hanging around my kids too long."

"Perhaps you should see a doctor. Or go home."

"I've just got to get out of this air-conditioning," I said, edging toward the door. She followed me, trying to object. "I'll be fine as soon as I get out of this air-conditioning and back into the heat."

"No, *wait*," she called insistently. "You may be suffering from heatstroke. I think that's it—the clammy skin, the way you look—"

"It's not heatstroke, I'm freezing in this goddamn refrigerator. Just leave me the fuck alone and I'll be *fine*!"

I fled, peeling off my jacket, tearing open the top of my blouse. I couldn't go back, not to that awful air-conditioning. I would stay out where it was warm.

I lay in bed with the windows wide open and the covers pulled all the way up. One of the men from my company phoned; his voice sounded too casual when he pretended I had reassured him. Carl's call only twenty minutes later was not a surprise. I'm fine, dear. You don't sound fine. I am,

though. Everyone is worried about you. Needlessly. I think I should come down there. No, stay where you are, I'll be fine. No, I think I should come and get you. And I'm telling you to stay where you are. That does it, you sound weird, I'm getting the next flight out and your mother can stay with the boys. You stay where you are, goddammit, or I might not come home, is that clear?

Long silence.

Is someone there with you?

More silence.

I said, is someone there with you?

It's just the heat. I'll be fine, as soon as I warm up.

Sometime after that, I was sitting at a table in a very dark place that was almost warm enough. The old woman sitting across from me occasionally drank delicately from a bottle of beer and fanned herself, even though it was only almost warm.

"It's such pleasure when it cool down like dis," she said in her slow honeyvoice. Even the old ladies had honeyvoices here. "The heat be a beast."

I smiled, thinking for a moment that she'd said *bitch*, not *beast*. "Yeah. It's a bitch all right but I don't like to be cold."

"No? Where you from?"

"Schenectady. Cold climate."

She grunted. "Well, the heat don't be a bitch, it be a beast. He be a beast."

"Who?"

"Him. The heat beast." She chuckled a little. "My grandma woulda called him a loa. You know what dat is?"

"No."

She eyed me before taking another sip of beer. "No. I don't know whether that good or bad for you, girl. Could be deadly either way, someone who don't like to be cold. What you doin' over here anyway. Tourist Quarter three blocks thataway."

"I'm looking for a friend. Haven't been able to find him since it's cooled down."

"Grandma knew they never named all de loa. She said new ones would come when they found things be willin' for 'em. Or when they named by someone. Got nothin' to do with the old religion any more. Bigger than the old religion. It's all de world now." The old woman thrust her face forward and squinted at me. "What friend *you* got over here? No outa-town white girl got a friend over here."

"I do. And I'm not from out of town any more."

"Get out." But it wasn't hostile, just amusement and condescension and a little disgust. "Go buy you some tourist juju and tell everybody you met a mamba in N'awlins. Be some candyass somewhere sell you a nice, fake love charm."

"I'm not here for that," I said, getting up. "I came for the heat."

"Well, girl, it's cooled down." She finished her beer.

Sometime after that, in another place, I watched a man and a woman dancing together. There were only a few other people on the floor in front of the bar. I couldn't really make sense of the music, whether it was jazz or rock or whatever. It was just the man and the woman I was paying attention to. Something in their movements was familiar. I was thinking he would be called by the heat in them, but it was so damned cold in there, not even ninety degrees. The street was colder. I pulled the jacket tighter around myself and cupped my hands around the coffee mug. That famous Louisiana chicory coffee. Why couldn't I get warm?

It grew colder later. There wasn't a warm place in the Quarter, but people's skins seemed to be burning. I could see the heat shimmers rising from their bodies. May I was the only one without a fever now.

Carl was lying on the bed in my hotel room. He sat up as soon as I opened the door. The heat poured from him in

waves and my first thought was to throw myself on him and take it, take it all, and leave him to freeze to death.

"Wait!" he shouted but I was already pounding down the hall to the stairs.

Early in the morning, it was an easy thing to run through the Quarter. The sun was already beating down but the light was thin, with little warmth. I couldn't hear Carl chasing me, but I kept running, to the other side of the Quarter, where I had first gone into the shadows. Glimpse of an old woman's face at a window; I remembered her, she remembered me. Her head nodded, two fingers beckoned. Behind her, a younger face watched in the shadows. The wrong face.

I came to a stop in the middle of an empty street and waited. I was getting colder; against my face, my fingers were like living icicles. It had to be only eighty-eight or eighty-nine degrees, but even if it got to ninety-five or above today, I wouldn't be able to get warm.

He had it. He had taken it. Maybe I could get it back.

The air above the buildings shimmied, as if to taunt. Warmth, here, and here, and over here, what's the matter with you, frigid or something?

Down at the corner, a police car appeared. Heat waves rippled up from it, and I ran.

"Hey."

The man stood over me where I sat shivering at a corner table in the place that bragged it had traded slaves over a hundred years ago. He was the color of rich earth, slightly built with carefully waved black hair. Young face; the wrong face, again.

"You look like you in the market for a sweater."

"Go away." I lifted the coffee cup with shuddering hands. "A thousand sweaters couldn't keep me warm now."

"No, honey." They caressed me with their voices down here. He took the seat across from me. "Not that kind of sweater. Sweater I mean's a person, special kinda person."

Who'd you meet in the Quarter? Good-lookin' stud, right? Nice, wild boy, maybe not white but white enough for you?"

"Go away. I'm not like that."

"You know what you like now, though. Cold. Very cold woman. Cold woman's no good. Cold woman'll take all the heat out of a man, leave him frozen dead."

I didn't answer.

"So you need a sweater. Maybe I know where you can find one."

"Maybe you know where I can find *him*."

The man laughed. "That's what I'm sayin', cold woman." He took off his light, white suit coat and tossed it at me. "Wrap up in that and come on."

The fire in the hearth blazed, flames licking out at the darkness. Someone kept feeding it, keeping it burning for hours. I wasn't sure who, or if it was only one person, or how long I sat in front of the fire, trying to get warm.

Sometime long after the man had brought me there, the old woman said, "Burnin' all day now. Whole Quarter oughta feel the heat by now. Whole city."

"*He'll* feel it, sure enough." The man's voice. "He'll feel it, come lookin' for what's burnin'." A soft laugh. "Won't he be surprised to see it's his cold woman."

"Look how the fire wants her."

The flames danced. I could sit in the middle of them and maybe then I'd be warm.

"Where did he go?" The person who asked might have been me.

"Went to take a rest. Man sleeps after a bender, don't you know. He oughta be ready for more by now."

I reached out for the fire. A long tongue of flame licked around my arm; the heat felt so good.

"Look how the fire wants her."

Soft laugh. "If it wants her, then it should have her. Go ahead, honey. Get in the fire."

On hands and knees, I climbed up into the hearth, moving slowly, so as not to scatter the embers. Clothes burned away harmlessly.

To sit in fire is to sit among a glory of warm, silk ribbons touching everywhere at once. I could see the room now, the heavy drapes covering the windows, the dark faces, one old, one young, gleaming with sweat, watching me.

"You feel 'im?" someone asked. "Is he comin'?"

"He's comin', don't worry about that." The man who had brought me smiled at me. I felt a tiny bit of perspiration gather at the back of my neck. Warmer; getting warmer now.

I began to see him; he was forming in the darkness, coming together, pulled in by the heat. Dark-eyed, dark-haired, young, the way he had been. He was there before the hearth and the look on that young face as he peered into the flames was hunger.

The fire leaped for him; I leaped for him and we saw what it was we really had. No young man; no man.

The heat be a beast.

Beast. Not really a loa, something else; I knew that, somehow. Sometimes it looks like a man and sometimes it looks like hot honey in the darkness.

What are you doing?

I'm taking the darkness by the eyes, by the mouth, by the throat.

What are you doing?

I'm burning alive.

What are you doing?

I'm burning the heat beast and I have it just where I want it. All the heat anyone ever felt, fire and body heat, fever, delirium. Delirium has eyes; I push them in with my thumbs. Delirium has a mouth; I fill it with my fist. Delirium has a throat; I tear it out. Sparks fly like an explosion of tiny stars and the beast spreads its limbs in surrender, exposing its white-hot core. I bend my head to it and the taste is sweet, no salt in his body at all.

What are you doing?

Oh, honey, don't you know.

I took it back.

In the hotel room, I stripped off the shabby dress the old woman had given me and threw it in the trash can. I was packing when Carl came back.

He wanted to talk; I didn't. Later he called the police and told them everything was all right, he'd found me and I was coming home with him. I was sure they didn't care. Things like that must have happened in the Quarter all the time.

In the ladies' room at the airport, the attendant sidled up to me as I was bent over the sink splashing cold water on my face and asked if I were all right.

"It's just the heat," I said.

"Then best you go home to a cold climate," she said. "You do better in a cold climate from now on."

I raised my head to look at her reflection in the spotted mirror. I wanted to ask her if she had a brother who always waved his hair. I wanted to ask her why he would bother with a cold woman, why he would care.

She put both hands high on her chest, protectively. "The beast sleeps in the cold. *You* tend him now. Maybe you keep him asleep for good."

"And if I don't?"

She pursed her lips. "Then you gotta problem."

In summer, I keep the air-conditioning turned up high at my office, at home. In the winter, the kids complain the house is too cold and Carl grumbles a little, even though we save so much in heating bills. I tuck the boys in with extra blankets every night and kiss their foreheads, and later in our bed, Carl curls up close, murmuring how my skin is always so warm.

It's just the heat.

Our Seducers

Richard Bowes has won two World Fantasy, an International Horror Guild, and Million Writer Awards. His new novel, *Dust Devil on a Quiet Street*, was issued in 2013 by Lethe Press, which has also recently republished his Lambda Award-winning novel *Minions of the Moon*. Recent and forthcoming appearances include: *F&SF*, *Icarus*, *Lightspeed*, and the anthologies *After*, *Wilde Stories 2013*, *Bloody Fabulous*, *Ghosts: Recent Hauntings*, and *Where Thy Dark Eye Glances: Queering Edgar Allan Poe*.

Pat Cadigan is a multiple Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning author, and recently won a Hugo for her novelette “The Girl-Thing Who Went Out For Sushi.” “It Was the Heat” proves that her talent for gripping horror is evident. Her fiction continues to be both emotionally and intellectually provocative and engaging.

Tom Cardamone is the author of the Lambda Literary Award-winning novella *Green Thumb*, as well as *Pacific Rimming*, *The Werewolves of Central Park*, and the short story collection, *Pumpkin Teeth*. He is also editor of the anthologies *The Lavender Menace: Tales of Queer Villainy!* and *The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered*. His fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines, and some of those stories have been collected on his website: pumpkintooth.net.

A lapsed musician and engineer, **Steve Chapman** lives with his wife and daughter at the New Jersey shore. Though he spends most days high above Times Square, in the

evening he can hear the ocean. His fiction has recently appeared in *Penumbra eZine*, the Harrow Press anthology *Mortis Operandi*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceress*.

J. T. Glover has published short fiction, articles, and interviews in *Fungi*, *Lightspeed*, NewMyths.com, and *Underground Voices*, among other venues. Diagnosed at the age of three with early-onset bibliophilia, he considers it a happy meeting of fate and constitution that he is an academic reference librarian by day, specializing in the humanities. Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, these days he lives in Virginia and can be found online at jtglover.com.

Theodora Goss's fantastical tales delve into mythology as much as they do cultural and literary history. She won a Rhysling Award for Best Long Poem for "Octavia Is Lost in the Hall of Masks" and a World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction for her story "Singing of Mount Abora." She has been a contributor to many publications, including *Apex Magazine*, *Clarkesworld*, *The Journal of Mythic Arts*, and *Strange Horizons*.

Orrin Grey is a writer, editor, amateur film scholar, and monster expert who was born on the night before Halloween. He's the author of *Never Bet the Devil & Other Warnings* and the co-editor (with Silvia Moreno-Garcia) of *Fungi*, an anthology of weird fungus-themed stories for Innsmouth Free Press, where he also writes a regular column on vintage horror cinema. John Langan once referred to him as "the monster guy," and he'll never let anyone forget it.

Caren Gussoff is a SF writer living in Seattle, WA. The author of *Homecoming* and *The Wave and Other Stories*, Gussoff's been published in anthologies by Seal Press and

Hadley Rille, as well as in *Abyss & Apex*, *Cabinet des Fées*, and *Fantasy Magazine*. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 2008, was the Carl Brandon Society's Octavia E. Butler Scholar at Clarion West. Her new novel, *The Birthday Problem*, will be published by Pink Narcissus Press in 2014. Find her online at @spitkitten, facebook.com/spitkitten, and at spitkitten.com.

Elizabeth Hand (elizabethhand.com) is the award-winning author of many novels for adults—including the Tiptree Award and Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for *Waking the Moon*, the Shirley Jackson Award for *Generation Loss*, the World Fantasy Award for *Illyria*—as well as a widely published reviewer in such venues as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the *Los Angeles Times*. She lives in Lincolnville, Maine.

Claire Humphrey writes novels and short stories, mainly about unhappy magicians. She works in the book trade as a buyer for Indigo Books, and she is the reviews editor at *Ideomancer*. In addition to all things literary, she likes boxing, photography, dark coffee, well-hopped beer, and frivolous shoes.

Alex Jeffers's stories have appeared in two of Steve Berman's previous Prime Books anthologies and a bunch of other places. Ten are collected in *You Will Meet a Stranger Far from Home*. Every second day he believes he will never complete another. Find him online at sentenceandparagraph.com.

E. L. Kemper lives in British Columbia, Canada and in Costa Rica where she writes, walks her dog on the beach, and drinks ridiculous quantities of coconut water. Erinn is a member of the Horror Writers Association and has a column in their monthly newsletter. Visit her blog at

erinnkemper.com to read about upcoming publications and chilling on the Caribbean coast.

Nicole Kornher-Stace lives in New Paltz, NY, with one husband, two ferrets, the cutest toddler in the universe, and many many books. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Best American Fantasy*, *Clockwork Phoenix 3*, *Apex*, and *Fantasy Magazine*. She is the author of one novel, *Desideria*; the lusciously-illustrated chapbook *Demon Lovers and Other Difficulties*; and her short book *The Winter Triptych*.

Ed Kurtz is the author of *A Wind of Knives*, *Dead Trash*, *Control*, and *The Deuce*. His short fiction has appeared in *Needle*, *Thuglit*, *Shotgun Honey*, and numerous anthologies, including Steve Berman's *Shades of Blue and Gray*. Kurtz lives in Texas, where he is at work on his next novel. Visit him online at edkurtz.net.

Carrie Laben is originally from New York and now lives in Missoula, Montana, where she recently obtained her MFA from the University of Montana. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Clarkesworld*, *Apex Digest*, *Camas*, and anthologies including *Fantasy: The Best of the Year* and *Shades of Blue and Gray*. When not writing, she can usually be found staring at birds or enjoying the local microbrews—although to the best of her knowledge, she has never shared one with Satan.

Tanith Lee was born in 1947 in London, England. She received a grammar-school education, and thereafter worked in various jobs, including restaurants and libraries. The publication, in 1975, of her first fantasy novel, *The Birthgrave*, liberated her into full-time professional writing. Since then she has produced ninety-four novels and

collections, and over three hundred short stories; written for TV, and BBC Radio. She is married to the artist and writer John Kaiine. They live with cats on the south coast. Lee has won several fantasy awards.

Nick Mamatas is the author of several novels, including *Bullettime* and *Love is the Law*. His short fiction has appeared in *Shades of Blue and Gray*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *New Haven Review*, and *Best American Mystery Stories*. As an anthologist, he has won the Bram Stoker Award for *Haunted Legends* (with Ellen Datlow) and was nominated for the Locus Award for *The Future Is Japanese* (with Masumi Washington). A native New Yorker, Nick now lives in California.

Mexican by birth, Canadian by inclination. **Silvia Moreno-Garcia** is an author and editor of all things speculative. Her fiction appears in the collection *This Strange Way of Dying* and various and sundry places. She has edited the *Dead North* and *Fungi* anthologies, among others. She blogs at silviamoreno-garcia.com/ and Tweets @silviamg. You can also find her hanging out around innsmouthfreepress.com.

Stephen Pope is the guy who sees all those old, abandoned buildings in the city and closed, broken-down gas stations along the highway and wonders, "What goes on in there when no one is around?" He resides in Texas, which has more than its fair share of horror writers. He says that anyone who reads his blog at stephenbpope.blogspot.com will eventually find wealth and perfect happiness, and he says it with a straight face.

Martin Rose writes a range of fiction from the fantastic to the macabre, holds a degree in graphic design, and resides in New Jersey where he is concluding work on a zombie

detective novel, *Bring Me Flesh, I'll Bring Hell*. More details are available at www.martinrose.org.

Michelle Sagara is an author, bookseller, and lover of literature based in Toronto. She writes fantasy novels as both Michelle Sagara and Michelle West (and sometimes as Michelle Sagara West).

J. Daniel Stone is a twenty-six-year-old writer born and raised in New York City, the place that he predominantly writes about. The stories of the five boroughs are endless. He does not eat meat, believes in equal rights, and absorbs as much art and science as he can. His debut novel, *The Absence of Light*, was published by Villipede Publications and features characters from "Unveiled."

Brad Strickland is a professor of English at Gainesville State College in Oakwood, Georgia. Since his first novel, *To Stand Beneath the Sun*, was published in 1985, he has written or co-written sixty-plus novels and more than a hundred short stories. He is an active member of the Atlanta Radio Theatre Company.

Nicole M. Taylor is a freelance writer, ghostwriter, and manuscript consultant. She has worked on everything from graphic novels to historical non-fiction and she's currently wrapping up her first novel, *The Witches Knot*. She lives in San Jose, CA with her husband and a snorty gargoyle monster named Magoo. She bloggerates here: www.nicolemtaylor.com.

Halli Villegas is the author of three collections of poetry (*Red Promises*, *In the Silence Absence Makes*, and *The Human Cannonball*), a book of short ghost stories (*The Hairwreath and Other Stories*), and was the co-editor of the anthologies *Imaginarium* and *In The Dark*. Her work has

appeared in many anthologies including *Chilling Tales 2*, *The White Collar Anthology*, *Bad Seeds*, and *Girls Who Bite Back*. She has also appeared in numerous magazines such as *CNQ*, *The LRC* and *Variety Crossings*. Halli is also the publisher of Tightrope Books, which has published sixty-one books to date, including the acclaimed yearly anthologies *The Best Canadian Poetry in English*, and *The Best Canadian Essays*. The gentleman in “Sleep of Reason” is based lookwise on Robson Green, who can haunt her dreams anytime.

Our Aging Ingenue

Steve Berman was first seduced by books as a child and by a man at age twenty. Literature was the more gentle lover. He is the editor of numerous anthologies. He resides in southern New Jersey, the only state in the Union that has an official devil, who may or may not be handsome depending on eyewitnesses.

Other Books by Steve Berman

So Fey: Queer Fairy Fiction

Magic in the Mirrorstone

Wilde Stories: The Year's Best Gay Speculative Fiction

Heiresses of Russ: The Year's Best Lesbian Speculative Fiction

The Touch of the Sea

Where Thy Dark Eye Glances: Queering Edgar Allan Poe

Bad Seeds: Evil Progeny

Zombies: Shambling Through the Ages

Shades of Blue and Gray: Ghosts of the Civil War

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